Tsukumodo Volume 2

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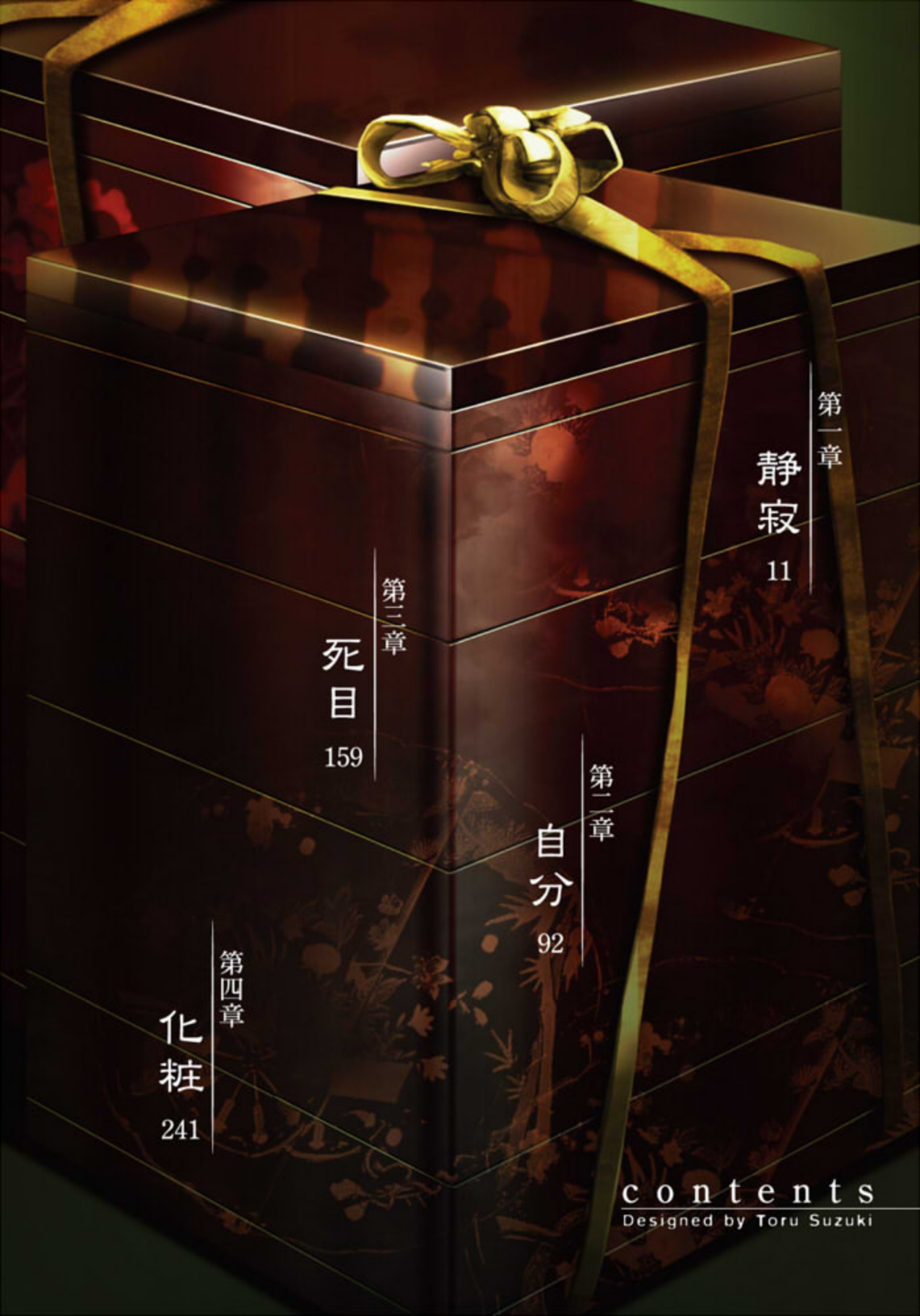
付喪堂の骨董店 2

不思議取り扱います

御堂彰彦
イラスト◆タケシマサトシ

電撃文庫

付喪堂骨董店
不思議取り扱います
2
御堂彰彦
イラスト◆タケシマサトシ



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Designed by Toru Suzuki

AGE COUNTER

In our world there are objects called 'Relics'.

Not antiques or objects of classical art, no: they can be tools with special powers created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owners' grudges or natural spiritual powers after long exposure.

For instance: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you'll look in the future, a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Everybody has most likely heard of such things, as they appear in countless fairy tales and rumors.

Most people consider *Relics* mere fantasies because they have never come across any. Even if a Relic were right before their eyes, they'd fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they'd dismiss it as a coincidence.

Some remain unconcerned, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

Regrettably, Relics are real, and more common than people think.

Whether they bring about good or ill fortune depends on the ones who choose to use them.

Chapter 1 - Silence

If you had to choose between a silent place and a lively place, which would you prefer?

A silent place when you want to read a book or study?

A lively place when you want to hang out with friends or eat something?

Depending on your purpose, your preference might change.

But even if it suits your purpose, a place that is *too* silent will make you uneasy and a place that is *too* lively will annoy you.

Be it silence or liveliness, it's all a matter of degree.

That said, of the two, I happen to prefer silence a bit more - most likely because I am used to quiet places.

What I am getting at is:

The Tsukumodo Antique Shop is as dead silent as ever .

One might compare it to the soft slumber of being in the womb.

While I was giving myself over to a silence that bundled me up in a blanket of cozy warmth, a bubble slowly rose beside me.

I touched it.

It burst into a "Re".

Another bubble came floating upwards.

I touched it.

It burst into a "Fa" this time.

One after another, the bubbles rose around me.

One, two, three—no, more. A hundred, two hundred, three hundred, more. More, more.

At last, the notes started to burst from the bubbles without my touch; they burst into notes of music. And these countless notes eventually grew into a melody.

This was the womb of a mother of music.

And I was one of the few permitted to step into this realm.

My duty was to gather those notes as they were born and bring them to the world outside.

Here, nothing existed but me and the notes.

There were no other humans, nor any other noises.

It was just me and the newborn notes.

"_____"

There was an intrusion from outside.

It felt like being inside a water balloon as it is popped by a needle.

In the resultant destruction everything was scattered.

The slumber I had indulged in and the silence—everything—crumbled away.

The newborn sounds streamed away. They seeped away through my fingers.

I was forced back to consciousness.

I was in the same room as always.

The sheets of music on the table before me were filled with notes.

When I was in the world of sounds, my hand would automatically write down the notes of the sounds I gathered.

That was how I composed. A method that only I could employ, requiring no instruments of any kind.

But the music on the score stopped halfway. The notes were distorted and broken—because of the noise that had intruded. Because of the disruption, the notes I had gathered had died aborning.

The room I was in was soundproofed from the ceiling to the floor. Not, however, to keep sounds from escaping. I lived in a deserted ghost town. There were no inhabited houses near mine .

The purpose of my soundproofing was to keep any sound from getting in.

It was all for the sake of composing without interruption.

However, the insulation could only dampen sound, not erase it completely.

Just as in this case, outside noise could break into this room—the womb of music—and cause pollution.

As soon as that pollution scattered my visualization, it was all over. The notes around me would fly away and leave the composition dead.

I had been so close...

Seized by anger, I threw open the door and headed upstairs to the living room on the ground floor.

Upon my arrival, I found my helper, Mei, asleep leaned over the table. On the floor was a tea cup. I didn't know whether the sound I had heard just now was the banging of her head against the table or her knocking the tea cup to the floor, but the thought that such a trivial thing had just killed my sounds was just unbearable.

Normally, such soft noises wouldn't be heard in that soundproofed room, but my ears are so sensitive that they pick up even such tiny sounds. And that's why I would always caution Mei to avoid making any noise.

"Hey!" I roared.

Mei's eyes flicked open.

As she recognized me with her frowsy eyes, she quickly sat up and asked,

"Have you already completed your work?"

"You ruined it."

Mei noticed the tea cup she had accidentally dropped on the floor and its spilled contents. She paled.

Probably realizing what she had done, she hung her head in shame.

"I'm in a bad mood. I'm going out for a while."

Leaving her to her own devices, I left the house.

My name is Eiji Kadokura. I'm 32 years old. I compose music. I have composed a considerable number of pieces so far and pride myself on being fairly popular and well-known.

My usual genre is soothing musicfor which I commonly accept assignments. But my most famous composition is most likely a classical piece I had written for a certain renowned violinist, which became a million-seller in spite of its genre, thanks to the recent classical music boom.

Today, I had also been working on a music piece for an assignment that was due in a week. Well, I had been until I was disturbed by my helper.

Once a piece of music has been dispersed, it is forever lost to me.

While traces of it remain in my head, it feels like a cheap copy if I finish the song with those remnants.

It resembles the feeling when the toy bricks you piled up in play start to shake, and even though you manage to regain balance, your tower eventually falls apart after a few more bricks are added.

Or maybe it's also similar to sewing a garment: your thread runs out and you have to tie in a different one—a knot remains and makes the garment look shabby.

Either way, a ruined piece of music can't be mended.

I couldn't stand a patched-together song.

I had to start all over again.

Even though there was not much time left before the deadline.

I got in my car and drove to a café I frequented.

Located in a calm basement, it was usually a much-appreciated haven of tranquility for me. But on that day of all days, I found the café unable to soothe me.

A group of ten-odd tourists or the like had gathered there. Their mere presence was enough to bother me, but on top of that, they seemed to treat the venue like a bar and made hellish amounts of noise.

Upon noticing me, the keeper of the café bowed his head apologetically.

I took it as an apology and an invitation to leave for today.

Suppressing the urge to give the rude customers a good dressing-down, I nodded to the keeper and left.

Because I was now even more irritated, the street noise I could usually tolerate annoyed me horribly.

Be it the engine noise of the cars and their piercing horns, the loud voices of strolling students and their vulgar laughs, the yells of salesmen who unsuccessfully tried to attract customers, or cheap music.

They all annoyed me.

Why was there *so much* noise and racket in the world?

As I wasn't at work, I wasn't asking for perfect silence, but living amidst so much noise and racket was unendurable. I couldn't understand how other people tolerated it.

While fighting the urge to roar at the noisemakers to shut up , I backed away into a narrow side street.

After I got some distance from the main street, the noise grew somewhat more bearable. While it hadn't faded out entirely, I could endure it from afar. I decided to walk among these back streets for the time being.

"Now if only there were another café somewhere, I'd be satisfied for the time being..."

The very moment I thought so, I spotted a small, quaint, antiquated shop before my eyes.

It was hard to tell from its exterior what kind of shop it was. Willing to linger if it turned out to be a café, I pushed open the door.

The pleasant sound of a bell announced the arrival of a customer.

Much to my regret, however, the shop was not a café. Various things were lined up on the shelves in a disorderly fashion. There were jars and plates and other ceramic ware, and dolls of Japanese and Western origin and one lone tinplate robot. There was even a camera. I assumed it was some kind of antique or second-hand shop.

Curious, I took a look around.

"Welcome," someone said to me.

Behind the counter sat a charming woman clad in black. She looked a little younger than I did, but her languorous air gave her a somewhat mature and mysterious aura.

"Are you looking for something specific?"

What I was looking for was someplace silent. The shop fit the bill perfectly, but saying so would have been admitting up front that I didn't intend to buy anything.

"I was just wondering if I might find something curious."

I made up an answer and looked at the shelves as though I were very interested.

"But there is something you seek, is there not?" she said, as though she had read my heart. "Tell me. Perhaps you might obtain the object of your desire?"

"As I said, something curious..."

"You don't want 'something.' You want 'some thing.'"

"Huh?"

"If you don't know what you want, you will always walk away empty-handed. You ought to be specific."

Perhaps she was teasing me with word play, or perhaps she had seen through my intention of not buying anything and wanted to chase me out. I was already feeling fairly irritable, so even this slight provocation managed to annoy me.

"If you really have what I want, I'd be more than willing to buy it."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Complete silence."

She gave me a slightly troubled glance. I was ashamed of acting so childish. I should have named some article she was likely to have or just left.

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid that you will not find it here."

"Certainly. I'm sorry, too. You wouldn't—"

"You will have to go to our sister shop."

I doubted my ears—but was angry an instant later.

She was playing with *me*? "Not here"? Don't make me laugh .

"It can be mine if I go to that sister shop? Then please, by all means, tell me where it is. *If* I can really find complete silence there, that is."

"A Relic that can create a room of complete silence by warding off all sound...That is...the Mirror of Serenity."

"Relic? The Mirror of Serenity?"

"Note that by 'Relic' I don't mean antiques or art objects . ' Relic' is the word we use for tools with special capabilities created by mighty ancients or magicians, or for objects that have absorbed their owner's grudge or natural spiritual powers. "

"A relic is something like a stone that brings ill luck, or a cursed voodoo doll or a triple mirror that shows how you are going to die. You've probably heard of many of them, and the Mirror of Serenity is one. But we don't currently have it here!"

I had no idea what she was talking about. While I had indeed heard of a superstition claiming that objects may gain a soul after a long time[1], hearing about it just then rubbed me the wrong way.

"Don't make a fool of me. Sure, I admit that I didn't enter this shop because I expected to buy something. But you have no right to mock me because of that. 'Relic', you say? 'Mirror of Serenity'? Stop ridiculing me by making up such mysterious names!"

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I don't. Complete silence does not exist. I have perfect soundproofing in my house, but I can still hear sounds from the outside."

"Because it's soundproofing. The Mirror of Serenity works differently. It wards off sound."

"Don't get so carried away..."

"This place is similar!"

It was then that I finally noticed.

There was not a sound in this shop.

Indeed, the woman and I were having a conversation, so there was sound. However, there was no noise from outside. I could not hear the distant noise that had tormented me until I'd entered the shop, not the slightest bit.

I perked up my ears and listened carefully for outside noise.

But I didn't hear a thing.

No matter what kind of soundproofing this shop had, there was no way it could block out every sound from my ears.

As long as we didn't speak, it was the complete silence I had been longing for.

"...but what does this mean?"

"It means that this place is special as well. But it doesn't create complete silence— noise from outside doesn't come here merely because of *a side effect*. However, the Mirror of Serenity will create complete silence for you."

"You said it can be had in your sister shop, right?"

My heart was pounding in my chest, and at that moment, I felt that the loudest sound in the world was the beating of my own heart.

"If I go there, will I get my hands on the Mirror of Serenity? "

"I can't say for certain. You must ask the shop's owner. But I'm sure you will be able to obtain it if you wish. Relics naturally find their way to appropriate owners."

I left after receiving a note with the address and store hours of the sister shop.

"_____"

At that instant, noise returned.

All the sounds that had previously vanished returned as soon as I left the shop.

It was as if I had been dreaming.

Suddenly, my cell phone rang. It was a call from my assistant, Mei. She told me that a client who had requested a composition had stopped by the house.

We had scheduled a meeting for today, but it had completely slipped my mind.

I replied that I'd be back within the hour and headed to the parking lot.

Before hanging up, she said something I found unsettling.

She asked me to keep my cell phone turned on.

Apparently, she had tried several times to reach me without success. However, my phone had never been turned off. That shop hadn't been underground, either, so I should have been within communication range.

A cold shiver ran down my spine and I thought about looking back at the shop, but my body wouldn't let me. I quickly left the area.

When I got home, Mei asked me where I had been.

I found myself unable to answer. I did remember the shop, but for some reason I couldn't remember where it was and what kind of person the shop assistant had been.

Only the paper with the address and store hours in my hands assured me that it had not been a dream.

Drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

Drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

Drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

"Shut up already!!" the shopowner roared.

Towako Setsusu's roar resounded through the building, but was drowned out by an even greater noise from outside, causing her roar to lose most of its impact.

Usually, her appearance was characterized by clear-cut eyebrows, self-confident eyes, and lustrous black hair that hung straight down to her waist. Today, however, her brows were wrinkled, her eyes were narrowed in a displeased fashion and her hair was a mess because she had been constantly mussing it up.

"Yelling at them won't get you anywhere!" I—Tokiya Kurusu—replied while leaning on the counter.

Towako-san made a theatrical gesture of putting her hand behind her ear and asked, "What did you say?"

I brought my face close to her ears and shouted, " Yelling at them won't get you anywhere!"

"Can it! Don't shout like that!"

"You can't hear me otherwise, can you!?"

"Be quiet, both of you - I can't concentrate on my book, " my co-worker Saki Maino complained indifferently.

Her pale hair reached the middle of her back and shone silver in the light, and her complexion was clear and pale. She was clad entirely in black: a frilly black shirt, long black skirt and black boots.

She was about a head shorter than I (an average male student), and so slender that she seemed she could be broken by a single embrace. She was sixteen and thus a year younger than I. She did look her age, but because of her demeanor, she seemed a little more mature. A smile

as radiant as a blooming flower (as suggested by the meaning of her name) utterly failed to adorn her face; instead, she was completely expressionless as if to refute the saying "nomen est omen."[2]

That said, even Saki appeared a bit annoyed today.

But Saki, don't take it out on us!

The noise from a construction site nearby was to blame for her irritation, as that cacophony had plagued our ears for some time.

We had been informed beforehand that the construction work would start today and last for a week, but we hadn't expected the repairs to be so deafening.

It was quite the opposite of the silence that had been present up until yesterday, when we might as well have been surrounded with gusts of wind and tumbleweeds.

This shop, the Tsukumodo Antique Shop (FAKE), handled, as the name suggests, *fake* Relics.

Not antiques or objects of art, but tools with special abilities created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owner's grudge or natural spiritual powers.

In tales and legends, there are often artifacts that possess special powers.

For example, a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows your future appearance, a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Everybody has most likely heard of such things.

But people consider them mere fantasies because they have never seen one; even if an artifact were right before them, it remains unnoticed; even if a mysterious event were to occur, it is dismissed as coincidence.

Some people are unconcerned, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

However, Relics are real, and more common than people think.

I'd recently dealt with a number of Relics: a pendulum that called forth coincidences, a statue that stimulated one's life force, a notebook that made one remember everything written in it, and a wallet that made me lose all my earnings unless they were spent on the day received.

However, such Relics were not for sale in the shop. As I mentioned earlier, we only sold fakes. The articles on the shelves were fakes that the shop owner had purchased under the incorrect impression that they were real.

Of course, the customers who visit us have no idea what Relics are. And so they feel that the uncommon pendants, uncanny dolls, unmoving clocks and the uninteresting stones we offer are a waste of time, then leave while regretting the mistake of dropping by in the first place.

Well, *if* they come in in the first place. Days when we don't have a single customer are hardly uncommon.

"Wouldn't you rather just close the shop for a week?" I suggested.

"But that would put a stop to our sales."

"We wouldn't get any customers anyway."

"What?"

"We wouldn't get any customers anyway!"

"Yeah, no one would care anyway!"

"You don't deny it!?"

"Now won't you keep quiet already? I can't concentrate on my book."

Now don't you get that it's not our fault? And didn't we go through this already?

Apparently, even Saki was annoyed because of the noise, though her annoyance barely showed on her face.

"Man, now my head's starting to hurt. Hell, can't we do something about it for crying out loud? Towako-san, isn't there a Relic that can switch off that noise?"

"Come on, don't ask for the... possible?"

"Possible?"

Towako-san walked out of the room with a reflective look on her face, and Saki put aside her book and came up to me.

"That's it!"

With those words, Towako-san returned from the storeroom with a mirror in her hands. The looking glass was covered with a purple cloth. The wooden frame surrounding it shined like lacquer and rested on a stand.

"That's a Relic that wipes out noise?"

"Well, have a look."

She pulled away the cloth.

Suddenly, the noise vanished.

The heavy noise from the building site vanished.

It hadn't *become unhearable*; rather, it had *vanished*. In addition, all the other sounds around me — the people

and traffic outside, the television in the living room, and so on —had also vanished.

" "

I *tried* to ask, *What's going on?* but my voice could not be heard.

I tried once more to give voice to my confusion, only to fail again. Not only was Towako-san unable to hear me, I couldn't even hear myself speaking. No, that's not exactly right. It's closer to say that there was no voice to be heard in the first place.

Towako-san realized this as well and yelled something at me, which—of course—I couldn't hear.

Instead, I tried to express myself with mouth movements.

By provocatively putting her hand behind her ear, Towako-san indicated that she couldn't hear anything.

This time I tried to tell her to cover the mirror again, but because of the sudden change in my mouth movements, she got confused and wrinkled her brow.

I pointed repeatedly at the mirror and formed the words, "cover it!" with my lips.

With a—possibly—loud angry voice, she put the cloth on the mirror.

Instantly, the lost sounds returned.

The noise from the building site, the traffic noise from further away, the approaching steps of Towako-san, and. ..

"For the love of God, why don't you get it? I can't hear you!"

...the sound of a fist.

In truth, I wanted to defend myself—to tell her that I couldn't hear her either—but the pain whirling around my head kept me from saying anything for a few moments.

"...That thing really shuts out all sound, huh?"

"That's what I've been telling you. Everything that is reflected in this mirror turns entirely soundless; the sounds from outside the reflected area are deflected and

the sounds from inside can't be produced to begin with. In short, it creates a zone of complete silence."

"But you can't do anything in such a place!"

I hadn't thought that it would be so hard to make oneself understood without a voice.

"Just communicate via pen and paper."

"Huh... But somehow it was *so* silent that it bothered me more than when it was noisy."

The noise of the building site had now settled down to a level where it became possible to talk normally, which made the unnatural silence of a few moments ago seem much worse.

"Besides, we can't attend to our customers like that!"

"We wouldn't get any customers anyway, right?"

"You two..."

"Are you still holding that against me?"

"Why, no? I'm used to it."

"You two..."

"Well, I do think that there won't be any."

"Can't you show at least *some* consideration?"

"You two..."

"Didn't you admit it yourself?"

"But *you* mustn't. Even if I do admit it myself."

Suddenly, our heads were grabbed from behind and forcibly turned toward the entrance.

"We have customers."

In the direction she indicated stood a man and woman.

"It's still 'no'."

"Can't we come to an arrangement?"

"No."

"You can have as much as you want."

"I'll refuse any offer."

The man and Towako-san had been going back and forth in this manner for some time. The customer was in his thirties, wore an expensive suit, and might have witnessed what had just happened with the mirror. He seemed to have a strong interest in it. At first he had stood stone-still in the entrance, but once he had gotten over his surprise, he started pressing Towako-san to sell him the mirror.

Towako-san repeatedly refused. Her will seemed firm, as she had just told him it wasn't a matter of money.

In fact, Towako-san had never sold a Relic to anyone. We only sold fakes and not actual Relics. She preferred that others did not obtain Relics.

"Why does he want the mirror so badly, anyway?"

The man was obviously wealthy - he had offered a remarkable sum.

"That man..." Saki muttered as she went to the living room.

She returned with the book she had been reading in her hands.

"I thought so."

There was a photograph of the man in the book. The accompanying profile said that his name was Eiji Kadokura and that he was a composer.

I see. It would make sense that he'd want a silent environment if he's a composer.

"But why do you have a book like that anyway?"

"I think that commerce and composition have a lot in common."

"Indeed, they *sound* similar."

"I'm being serious!"

"So tell me what you actually meant."

"Providing the music someone desires and providing the goods someone desires is very similar, isn't it?"

Saki just doesn't tell jokes. She's always very serious about her work and spares neither trouble nor expense to improve her customer service.

Of course, it was forbidden to disagree with her and tell her that her book, *Composing made easy!*, had nothing to do with customer service. I didn't agree with her statement about commerce and composition, either.

"Anyway, I'm not selling it to you. And I have no business with you," Towako-san said point-blank and took the mirror with her to the living area.

"Please wait!"

"I am afraid I must ask you to stop here."

The building that housed the shop also served as the home of Towako-san and her freeloading boarder Saki. Because the customer was about to follow them out of the shop into their private living space, I had to block his way.

"I have nothing to discuss with a part-timer."

I couldn't help taking offense at his attitude.

"We have nothing to discuss with you, either! Please leave if you don't intend to buy anything."

"That's what I'm here for."

"Please leave if you don't intend to buy an article that's actually for sale. Just because this is a shop, doesn't mean that we are obliged to sell things that aren't for sale."

Kadokura-san had just opened his mouth to continue complaining when the ringing of his cell phone resounded through the shop. He grudgingly took his phone out and flicked his tongue after reading the display.

"...a business related call. Looks like I have no choice."

"We don't hope that you will visit our store again!"

"I will!"

"Please don't."

The bothersome customer squared his shoulders and left the store.

"He's gone for now," I shouted toward the living room where Towako-san was hiding.

She muttered "okay" with a displeased look.

"Why didn't you just sell it to him? For such a pretty penny..." I asked and was glared at.

At the risk of repeating myself: Towako-san is against giving out Relics. Partly because of her collecting passion , but mostly because she knew of many people whose lives had been ruined by Relics.

Should I be proud of the fact that having received a Relic from her, I seem to have earned her trust?

"Excuse me..." a woman said as Saki led her over.

It was Kadokura-san's companion.

"Please let me apologize for Kadokura's rudeness."

I wondered if she was his manager or something. She didn't look that much older than I, but her air was that of a genuine business woman.

"Please call this number should you change your mind ."

She held out a business card with the name "Eiji Kadokura" and his contact information.

Towako-san, however, showed no sign of wanting to accept the card. Losing to her helpless gaze, I accepted the card instead, and was glared at even harder.

Apparently, Towako-san did not approve of my action . She should have told me so *before* I accepted.

"It's been a pleasure," Kadokura-san's companion said with a bow and left the shop.

"Now throw that card away."

"But that would be kinda..." I muttered as I began to turn and glanced in the direction in which Kadokura-san's companion had left.

It was then that a painful noise rang inside my head——

It was a place I had never seen before.

I saw a room.

My field of vision encompassed a wall—and a shut door.

Scuffed with countless longish lines, the door gave off a bizarre impression.

My vision moved downward, bringing the lower part of the scene into focus.

A woman had collapsed on the floor.

She was wearing a frilly dress and curled up into a ball , and was completely still..

It was—

"What's wrong?"

Towako-san's voice brought me back. She looked quizzically at me.

"Did you have a vision?" Saki hit the nail on the head, having guessed from my appearance.

The scene I had witnessed after that painful noise was an image of the future, revealed to me by my Relic.

My right eye is artificial. It has been replaced by a Relic named "Vision" that I received from Towako-san.

"Vision" sometimes shows me events from the immediate future.

When it happens, a pain runs through my head, much like static on a TV, followed by a cut-scene of the future.

However, "Vision" won't show me the entire future: I can't foresee the winning number of a lottery, or the winner of a sports match. I can't even predict the weather , nor can I choose to see a particular future event.

But there is one type of future that "Vision" shows me without fail: the potential moment of my death or that of someone I'm acquainted with.

What I had just seen was the impending death of a certain person.

"That woman... is going to die."

"Shit!"

I crumpled up a blank sheet of music and threw it at the wall , just to lean back powerlessly immediately afterwards. Unable to hold my weight, the chair I was sitting in fell over and left me staring at the ceiling.

It wasn't one of Mei's mistakes that had brought me back from my creative reverie today. I was simply having trouble concentrating.

My concentration had been better in the morning, and it was a shame that it hadn't lasted. Because of... No, that doesn't matter. When I'm in the zone, I wouldn't lose my concentration over something so trivial.

I was in a slump. Despite the imminent deadline, I didn't even have an image. When was I last in such a terrible slump?

...Right, the time when I had just left home.

Back then I was living in a tumbledown apartment that was dozens of years old. Because I wanted to avoid noise of all forms, I had chosen a remote place far away from the city. I hadn't been as nervous back then, but under the stress generated by the anxiousness of living on my own and the change of environment, I had found myself completely unable to write a single piece of music.

How did I manage to overcome the slump back then...?

I didn't remember. The slump had been over before I knew it . Well, most likely, I hadn't even considered it a slump at the time.

But that's right. This isn't a slump, either.

I'm just having some trouble concentrating.

If I manage to concentrate, I'll be able to compose again.

I calmed myself down by closing my eyes and taking deep breaths.

Imagine it. Imagine the world of sound...

—Clank—

I heard the very soft sound of something falling to the ground upstairs.

My image vanished and my concentration disintegrated into thin air.

Again...? Yet again...?

"SHIT!"

Why do I have to hear it? Why can't I just ignore that sound...

A few moments later, a knocking at the door invaded the room with its sound and vibration. I paid it no heed, but the knocking didn't stop. Hadn't I told Mei not to knock more than five times...?

"Silence!"

I thrust open the door. With a short shriek, Mei fell on her bottom. However, I didn't feel any guilt.

"What is it?"

"Ah, yes. I have a work related call on the line for you."

"Tell them I'll call back later."

"But... it seems to be rather urgent..."

"I said later!" I yelled as I slammed the door shut with deliberate vigor, only to end up getting annoyed at the noise I produced.

I was craving complete silence.

I was sure I could write music if I possessed it.

The "Mirror of Serenity" crossed my mind.

"Welcome!"

While absorbed in admiring the almost palatial residence before our eyes, we were greeted by the woman who had accompanied the composer Eiji Kadokura.

Her name was Mei Oohashi and she took care of the composer. As proof—or perhaps not—she was dressed as a maid. The business-woman-ish aura she had given

off in the shop was completely gone, and to be honest, she was even standing out a little now.

Using the directions that Mei-san had given us, Saki, Towako-san and I had travelled to the residence-cum-workplace of Eiji Kadokura.

His house was located in a suburb far away from the center of the city. The suburb was a district that had become a ghost town because its development had faltered. Even though there were lots of apartment buildings, there were no shops or people at the train station. As his residence was a fair distance from the station, we had to take one of the rare taxis to get there. It turned out to be quite a wearying journey. In all honesty, I wouldn't have expected a famous music composer to live in such a place.

I suspected he had deliberately chosen this location because he wanted to escape the noise of the city.

"This way, please."

Guided by Mei, we walked through a garden of dimensions that would have been unimaginable in the city, passed through a pointlessly large entrance and finally arrived at a living room, but only after traveling

down a lengthy corridor. Mei told us to make ourselves comfortable on the sofas and disappeared into the kitchen to prepare some tea.

The moment she was gone, however, Kadokura-san appeared.

"Hello and welcome. I've been waiting for you!"

He welcomed us with open arms, though, truth be told , we clearly were not the true target of his eagerness.

"Have you brought *it* with you?"

With a scowl on her face, Towako-san showed him the cloth-wrapped mirror in her bag.

A contented smile appeared on his face.

The reason we had come here was *not* to leave the Mirror of Serenity with him.

Rather, it was to prevent the future that "Vision" had shown me—in other words, Mei-san's death.

Saki had stopped me from going to Mei-san and directly instructing her to watch out because she was going to die. It was definitely a bad idea to thoughtlessly inform her. After all, we had no clue as to the circumstances of her death. Therefore, we decided that our best option would be to approach and watch over her.

So in order to get closer to Mei-san, we submitted the following proposal to Kadokura-san:

While we would not sell the mirror, we would be willing to lend it to him for a few days - but only if the mirror remained in our presence at all times.

Kadokura-san had agreed to these conditions. He probably thought that we wanted to a free stay at a famous composer's residence in return for lending the mirror to him.

However, we had no interest in any of that. We had to find and eliminate the cause of Mei-san's death before the lending period came to a close.

In truth, Towako-san was against this operation because our actions might themselves become the cause of Mei-san's death. It was, however, just as plausible that her death would occur because of our inaction. If so, we couldn't simply sit back and take a "wait and see" approach.

Fortunately, I had a holiday on Friday because it happened to be my school's anniversary, giving us a total of three days time. Because "Vision" is unable to see very far into the future, I was sure to find some hints to ward off Mei-san's demise.

"Thank you for waiting," Mei-san said as she returned with a tray of tea. The rich aroma of black tea permeated the room.

Once the wonderful smell tickled her nose, instead of widening her eyes or raising her voice, Saki allowed her eyebrows to move a wee bit. Her gaze became fixed on the tea set. She was as expressionless as ever, but I could tell that she was extremely surprised. Had Mei-san brought us an extra-expensive kind of tea?

Without noticing Saki's astonishment, Mei-san placed a teapot on the table, followed by a tea cup in front of each of us. The tea set was a high-end brand that even I had heard of.

Just as it crossed my mind that replacing a single cup would cost a fortune, Mei-san dropped a cup on the table .

With a clank, the handle of the cup broke off.

There was an awkward silence.

"Oh my!" Mei-san exclaimed, "E-Excuse me! Excuse me ! I'll bring a new teacup right away!"

She picked up the teacup and the broken handle and smacked Kadokura-san's head—no, accidentally hit his head—with the tray while turning around.

"Ughn..."

"*Gyaa*! Excuse me, excuse me!"

"J-Just go and bring a new one already," Kadokura-san calmly ordered. He had obviously become accustomed to her behavior, since he wasn't at all worked up in response to Mei-san's panic. "Let me apologize for her, she's a little... clumsy..."

"*Gyaa!*"

Mei-san's scream emanated from the kitchen, followed by the sound of something falling to the floor. Well... at least there was no shattering sound.

"I'm sorry about the fuss."

...Perhaps one of the reasons that Kadokura-san was after the silence-imposing Mirror of Serenity was Mei-san herself.

"S-Sorry for the wait!"

She returned with a new teacup, and I began to feel uneasy.

Due to her excess momentum, Mei-san ended up banging her knee against the table while trying to set down the teacup. The jolt caused the teapot to tilt, but just as I was sure that it would fall over, Saki grabbed it. I had never seen her move that quickly before. Perhaps Saki's dexterity increases in proportion to the price of the black tea at stake?

"E-Excuse me, excuse me."

Mei-san kept bowing her head and gratefully grabbed the hand Saki was holding the teapot in.

"Stop that and get us a wash cloth."

Only a bit of tea had been spilled, but upon receiving that order, she hurried back to the kitchen for a washcloth.

Even without taking her maid outfit into account at all, her "professional business woman" aura had gone up in smoke for good.

"Again, let me apologize for her, she just can't sit still." Kadokura-san lowered his head in her place and looked at Saki with a wry smile. "I wish she were as composed as you."

I glanced at Saki, who was sitting next to me.

"Have you burned yourself?"

"It's no big deal," she said dismissively, but she was rubbing her hands under the table.

As there was still some time left until dinner, I decided to take a walk through the Kadokura residence by myself - not simply to look around, of course, but for investigative purposes.

The door I had seen in my vision of Mei-san's death was very peculiar, as it was marked with a strange pattern of lines.

I thought that by locating that door, I could make sure Mei-san wouldn't get anywhere near it, or else I would remove all dangerous objects near it- and thus save her from dying.

The ground floor of the Kadokura residence held a large living room, a kitchen and so on, whereas the bedrooms for Kadokura-san, Mei-san, and guests were upstairs.

Furthermore, there was also an underground room fully equipped with soundproofing that served as Kadokura-san's studio. According to him, he would always compose in the underground room.

I was about to investigate that very room.

I had already thoroughly explored the ground floor and upstairs rooms, but there was no trace of the door that "Vision" had shown me. Only the basement was left.

The stairway leading to the basement was longer than I had expected and wound back and forth, which showed me just how deep underground the room was. Most likely, Kadokura-san wanted to get as far away from external noises as possible. I couldn't hear my own footsteps because even the stairway itself had been carpeted.

The door to the workroom appeared before me.

However—

"...Off the mark, huh."

At first glance, it had looked like the door in my vision - the shapes were certainly similar. However, there were no lines on the door, so it was not the door "Vision" had shown me. This was the only underground door.

"Perhaps it's not even in this house?"

In that case, we would be forced to keep an eye on Mei-san herself. As far as I knew, Saki was with her at the moment and helping with the chores.

I decided to watch over Mei-san as well, and turned around towards the stairway.

"Whoa!"

"Kyaa!"

Mei-san was standing right there, causing me to scream in surprise. In response to my scream, Mei-san lost her balance and fell down the stairs.

I reflexively supported her, but because I hadn't been prepared, I was dragged down with her.

"A-Are you all right? Excuse me, excuse me!"

"N-No, I was the one who surprised you..."

Mei-san apologized yet again while still on top of me. I wondered - how many times had I already seen her like this?

"What are you doing in the dark?"

Saki looked down at me from above with a cold expression—well, the same expression as always.

"N-Nothing! You've been watching, so you know that, right?"

"That's not what I mean. I meant to ask what you've been doing down here alone, but as I see that you are making excuses, I suppose you did that intentionally?"

"E-Excuse me, Maino-san. I didn't mean to cling to your boyfriend! It was an accident, so please don't get angry with him!"

After falling silent for a while, Saki replied without changing her expression by saying "he's not my boyfriend."

Mei-san turned around to face me.

"Eh? You're not? I was sure you were because she got angry."

"Nope. We are not in a relationship, nor is she angry. She's always like that."

"Really?"

Unconvinced, Mei-san stared at Saki's face. It was no surprise that Mei-san couldn't understand Saki's deadpan expression.

"Yes, as Tokiya said: I'm expressionless, emotionless and blunt. So please don't mind it," Saki said bluntly.

But... was it just me or did she somehow seem a little angry? I had thought that I'd learned to read the feelings behind her poker face, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"Anyway, we'd better carry it in."

"What's that?"

"Ah, this is the sparkling water Eiji-sama likes to drink while working. We were going to bring in supplies," Mei-san explained while pointing at the small cardboard boxes that she and Saki were holding.

However, that was not what I was asking.

"Your outfit."

"...Mei-san made me wear this."

In a rare turn of events, Saki, who loved black clothes more than anything, wore a pure-white apron like a maid. Most likely, she had been talked into wearing this outfit when she offered to help Mei-san. The fact that she was still wearing her black dress underneath was probably her version of a compromise.

"You look adorable in it, Saki-san! Now, this way," urged Mei-san as she opened the door and beckoned Saki over.

Saki climbed down the stairs and trod on my feet as she walked past.

"Ouch!"

"Oh? I'm sorry," she said indifferently and entered the room.

She *was* angry after all! Mei-san was right. Although I had no idea what had made her upset.

For the sake of continuing the surveillance of Mei-san, I followed her into the room.

The room measured several square meters. While I didn't see any instruments, piles of sheet music were scattered about on the table and the floor. It really felt like the workroom of someone in the music business. There was also a laptop, so perhaps Kadokura-san was using it as an alternative to real instruments when composing.

"Saki-san, please put it in there," ordered Mei-san while pointing at a small fridge in a corner.

Mei-san picked up the scattered sheets and put them in order, after which she started to collect the partially finished bottles and empty the trash. The incident with the tea had given me pause, but she was working rather efficiently this time.

Leaving them to their respective jobs of tidying up and replenishing the stock of sparkling water, I closed the door. The room literally felt as though it had become isolated from the outside world.

While I could hear the two girls working, the sounds from outside were shut out. Well, not only was there nobody there, but we were also underground, so there was no noise anyway, but that was the impression I got. Probably because of the sound-proofing.

I thought that with a room like this, Kadokura-san would hardly need the Mirror of Serenity.

"Are you finished tidying up?"

The door was opened again and Kadokura-san came in.

In his hands was the Mirror of Serenity. It looked like he had taken it from Towako-san and wanted to try it out as soon as possible.

"Almost."

"It doesn't have to be perfect," he said absent-mindedly , and looked around the room. Apparently, he was considering where to put the mirror.

"I'm fascinated! Isn't the soundproofing of this room perfect?" I asked.

Kadokura-san answered with a wry smile, "Indeed, I have spent a lot of money on outfitting this room. But it's not perfect. I can still hear outside noise even when I close the door."

"Really?"

I had no idea how well soundproofing worked, but I figured it would take one hell of a noise to reach the room down here.

"Yeah. For example when Mei breaks a teacup upstairs ," he said, which discouraged Mei-san and set off her apologies yet again.

"You can hear something like *that*? Does that mean that there's a crack in the soundproofing?"

"That's what I told the manufacturers at first, too. But it seems like normal people don't hear certain things that I can. And I'm not just imagining things!"

"As a matter of fact, one time when Eiji-sama was in this room with the manufacturers, he told them that he heard me break a teacup. Apparently, no one else heard anything, but when they went to the living room to check ..."

"Mei had knocked a teacup off the table, just as I had said. The manufacturers were at their wit's end."

So he has special ears?

"It's not that I hear everything, but for some reason I don't miss any of her slip-ups."

"Nasty ears."

"Did you say something, Mei?"

"No, never mind."

To be honest, I was more concerned with their relationship than with the story I had just heard.

At first, I had thought they were in a purely business relationship of employer and assistant, but they interacted far too casually. In addition he neither fired her despite her numerous mistakes, nor did he really get angry about her clumsiness.

"Well then, we won't disturb you any longer. Good luck with work. Let's go, Kurusu-san, Maino-san."

Upon bowing to Kadokura-san, she left the room holding a garbage bag. We followed her, and Kadokura-san started composing.

The heavy door closed with a whomp and separated him from us.

On the way back to the ground floor, Saki posed a question to Mei-san,

"How did you get to know Kadokura-san?"

"Eh?"

"Because somehow you don't seem like employer and assistant."

Apparently, Saki had gotten the same impression of their relationship that I had.

"I used to be an employee at the Kadokura's."

"An employee?"

"Eiji-sama comes from a long line of doctors and his family owns a hospital. I happened to be employed at their mansion. That's where I met Eiji-sama."

"Coming from that background, it's quite surprising that he chose to become a composer."

"Yes, it's as you say. His father strictly disapproved of his chosen career. It was only natural, as Eiji-sama had already enrolled at a medical university when he decided to switch to composing. In the end, he left home, and followed the path of a composer with a firm and unbending will."

"Does that mean that you followed him?"

"Yes. As you can see, I am clumsy and always making mistakes. There's no way I could have stayed employed at the mansion without Eiji-sama's assistance. I don't know how many times I was about to get dismissed, but he came to my rescue every time."

I was a bit surprised. No, I was very surprised. Because of his forceful attempts to get his hands on the Mirror of Serenity, my impression of Kadokura-san wasn't exactly positive. I thought that like most successful people, he was conceited, but apparently I had been wrong.

"He tends to be misunderstood because of his stubborn nature, but he's actually a very kind person!" Mei-san added, perhaps because she had guessed at my thoughts. "Lately, he has been in a slump and having trouble composing, but I'm sure he only needs a push to get past it, since he did just fine without any soundproofing in the past. I'm positive that the mirror will become that push. Thank you so much for lending it to him."

Mei-san stopped and bowed down deeply.

"I will prepare dinner now. Please make yourself comfortable in the living room."

While gazing after Mei-san, I said to Saki,

"I really want to save her."

"That's what we're here for, right?" she replied and slapped me on the back.

I was floating in an all-encompassing, cozy silence.

Even though it was the same thing, it was clearly different.

This time, I had slid into the world of sound within the complete silence of the Mirror of Serenity.

That was all that had changed, yet everything looked completely different.

As though a slightly unbalanced sphere had become perfectly round.

As though a slightly rough surface had become polished and smooth.

As though a cup of slightly polluted water had become clean and pure.

In other words, it had become perfect.

It was the perfection I had been longing for.

What kind of sounds will be born here?

I'll give it a try right away. I need a pen and a sheet...

"Uwa!!"

After I opened my eyes, I saw someone in the periphery of my vision, causing me to fall from my chair in surprise.

It was Settsu-san. I hadn't noticed her entrance at all.

She approached the mirror and quietly turned it over.

At once, the world around me underwent a sudden change. Sound suddenly returned as if a switch had been flipped,

"Am I interrupting?"

"No, I haven't started composing yet."

"Quite the enthusiast, aren't you? You even forgot to lock the door."

As it seemed, I had been so impatient that I had forgotten to lock the door. I had not noticed her intrusion- I was amazed that it was so hard to notice someone without sound, and felt great respect for the mirror and its power.

So far, no soundproofing had succeeded in completely shutting out all sound.

Of course I had always heard Mei's knocks, and I had even heard what she was doing upstairs. The soundproofing manufacturers were left in disbelief, but as a matter of fact, my ears could hear such sounds.

My ears are superior to others', and no matter whom I would ask, no one was able to provide me with a setup that would give my ears complete silence.

I had almost given up. Had I not learned about the Mirror of Serenity by chance, I would have given up. I could only think of the mirror as a gift from above.

Without looking at me, Settsu-san asked "What's your first impression of the mirror?" At the same time, she was tracing the border of the face-down mirror with her finger.

"It's fantastic! I can't believe it's possible to shut out useless noise to such an extent. If I have this mirror, I can dive smoothly into my world of sound."

"You didn't notice that I entered the room, right?"

"Yes, I heard not a..."

"You didn't even sense my presence, right?"

"Uh? Yes, indeed."

"Don't you think it's unnatural not to notice when someone enters the room?"

"That just proves how well I could concentrate on my work. "

"You're in the wrong: it's all because of the Mirror of Serenity. It doesn't only shut out the sound from outside, you know? It shuts out the entire outside world, so to speak."

"?"

"Not only does it disrupt sound, but also all similar things like the presence of others or electric waves. That's why you don't notice someone right by your side. Not only does it silence loud voices, you also don't receive any calls on your cell. That being said, it's not like it physically blocks off the room, so it's still possible to enter from outside."

"I see. In other words, if I had locked the door and you hadn't been able to enter, I may have pulled an all-nighter without even noticing?"

Settsu-san smirked at my joke, but it wasn't at all a favorable smile.

"I do hope it wouldn't get graver than that."

"Eh?"

"Do yourself a favor and refrain from using it too often. I *am* loaning it to you of necessity, but that's all. This item is beyond your ability."

With those words, she left the room.

The next morning.

In the end, we had come away empty-handed on the first day and badly needed to find a clue today.

When I left the room that I had been given, I was greeted by one hell of a noise.

The sound had come from the kitchen, where, for some reason, Mei-san was lying prone on the floor. Not that the reason was actually hard to figure out.

Neither Kadokura-san nor Saki seemed to really mind. Kadokura-san remained seated in the living room, and Saki picked up the spoons and forks Mei-san had dropped. After a little bit, Mei-san suddenly stood up and apologized repeatedly with a pale face.

"Good morning."

"Ah, morning," said Kadokura-san as he raised his face from the newspaper he was reading. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Did you not sleep well?"

"I was absorbed in work, you know. Before I knew it, it was morning. I haven't been able to concentrate that well in ages! It's all thanks to that mirror. I couldn't even hear any of Mei's accidents."

I couldn't deny myself a wry smile when I heard that Kadokura-san hadn't even considered the possibility that Mei-san had made no mistakes.

"Not to sound rude, but why did you hire her?" I asked in a low voice so that Mei-san couldn't hear me. " Kadokura-san, are you actually quite caring? From what I heard, you've always been such a person."

"Always? Did Mei tell you anything?"

"Mm, yes. A few things."

"Ah, she's being a blabbermouth again. But well, it's not that I'm especially kind or anything like that. You already know that I come from a long line of doctors and that she was employed at the family mansion?"

"Yes."

"She was my very first fan." He put down the newspaper and gazed into the distance. "My father, you see, frowned on my even composing music as a pastime—telling me that I should use that time for studying. Thus, the mansion staff were constantly observing me and reported to him when they saw me composing. Mei, however, was the only one who didn't join in. Why, she even liked my music and asked me to play for her! She would even stand up for me when I had an argument with my father, and when I made the

decision to move out, she insisted on following me because she feared that I couldn't do my own housework. I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for her," he said and added jokingly, "although I never told her that."

He quickly changed the subject. "By the way, where's Settsu-san?"

"Still asleep, I guess? She's not a morning person."

"I'm awake!"

Speaking of the devil. Towako-san responded while walking down the stairs.

"Did you sleep well?"

"The bed was *wonderfully* soft. Quite different from how I usually sleep."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

"Yeah, but now my back's aching. I miss my own bed! So are you making progress? Seems like you've been up until late at night from the looks of it," she pointed out as

she noticed his red eyes. All in all, including her not-so-subtle suggestions that she wanted to go home, her attitude was hardly friendly.

"Sorry, but this isn't something you can complete simply by spending extra time. It's still going to take some effort."

"I see. Tell me once you're done. We can't stay too long."

"Do you really have to be in such a rush?"

"Sorry, but my shop's closed right now. I can't leave it like that forever, now can I?"

"If that's your concern, why don't you just leave the mirror here? Rest assured that I will return it when..."

Towako-san's eyes glinted angrily.

"I-I'm joking! Of course I'll give it back to you when you leave!"

"Of course you do. Once again, I have no intention whatsoever to let go of that mirror. But I do intend to go home tomorrow. Get your piece done by then."

"I understand. I'm going downstairs for another round !"

After telling Mei-san to bring his breakfast to his workroom, he went downstairs.

"What?" asked Towako-san with sleepy eyes upon noticing my gaze.

"I just thought you're pretty grouchy today."

"Of course I am. I'm not here voluntarily, nor do I want him to use a Relic, but let's not go into that. Anyway, did you make any progress?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then get your ass in gear. As I said before, I don't plan on staying here much longer."

I closed the door to the basement behind me and made sure I was alone.

"Fuck! That stupid cow!" I blurted out, unable to suppress my true feelings.

The sheet music on my desk caught my eye. The leaves were covered with various music notes.

In reality, I was already done.

Never before had I ever completed a piece so quickly.

My slump had been blown away. I never imagined that pure concentration could speed up composition so much. In addition , the final results were of high quality.

I gazed at the toppled Mirror of Serenity.

Without a doubt, that mirror was responsible for my remarkable progress.

However, Settsu-san planned on retrieving the mirror once I was done.

I knew all too well that the mirror wasn't mine. I had merely borrowed it from the staff of that antique store.

Nevertheless, I couldn't imagine letting go of that mirror anymore.

It was their fault for lending it to me.

It was their fault for rubbing my nose in how splendid that mirror was.

There was no way I could let go of it so easily, now that I'd experienced its wonders.

They weren't able to take full advantage of it anyway, and would only use it for trivial matters - like erasing construction noise.

It was downright outrageous. The mirror wasn't meant to be used by such ignoramuses.

It was meant to be used by someone who could fully appreciate its potential - someone like me.

In my hands, it would enable me to craft superior pieces of music for everyone, at a greater speed than ever before.

Wouldn't that also be to the benefit of the mirror itself? Of course it was. Such a magnificent mirror wouldn't want to gather dust in some storeroom, only to be abused every once in a while to erase some noise.

But what should I do?

How could I become the rightful owner of that mirror?

How could I open Settsu-san's eyes?

Just... how?

Our second day at Kadokura-san's house was already half over.

Towako-san planned on going home the following day . Not so much due to her shop duties, but mostly because she couldn't stand to lend out her Relics. I had to go to school, so I couldn't stay indefinitely either.

However, a human life was at stake. It was out of the question to depart without unearthing a clue.

"Kurusu-kun, can you spare me a moment?" Kadokura-san stopped me when he found me strolling around the building. "I'd like to ask you a favor."

"Yes?"

"I'd like you to deliver this," he said and handed me a bag of three CDs. "One disk contains my new composition and the other two are reference materials that I used. I'd like you to deliver them to my client."

"You're done?"

"Mostly. But I want to get some feedback today since I have to return the Mirror of Serenity tomorrow. If the client dislikes the piece, I'll have to revise it."

I supposed it would be bothersome for him if he had to revise his composition without the mirror.

"There's already another job I have to deal with. I'm really sorry for bothering you, but can I ask you to do me this favor? Of course you won't be doing it for free!"

Honestly speaking, the payment was very attractive, but I had no time for an errand like that. On the other hand, since we were the ones who imposed the time limit on his use of the mirror, it was difficult to turn him down .

"How long does it take to get there and back?"

"I guess about two hours in total."

Two hours... That's not so long. I guess I can have Saki keep an eye on Mei-san in the meantime.

"Okay. I'll deliver it for you."

"Thank you. Let me arrange for a car to bring you to the station. Mei! Mei, are you here?"

"Um... is Mei-san driving me by any chance?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. Believe it or not, she has a license!"

Of course she does. I didn't expect him to order someone without a driver's license to give me a lift. I had asked because I was frightened of her driving regardless. I had thought he'd call for a taxi, which is what he'd done when we arrived.

In my mind's eye, I could already see Mei-san apologizing for getting into an accident.

At least that wasn't a "Vision."

The moment she gripped the handle, Mei-san became a different person. I had hoped for a better outcome, but she stayed unchanged.

This was just too frightening. If she had become over-cautious like a different person, that would still have been better than this!

"I'm really sorry for making you help us out all of a sudden," she apologized to me as I sat in the passenger's seat.

Originally, she would have run this errand, but Kadokura-san had apparently decided that it would be inappropriate for her to leave his guests unattended for several hours.

"Well, I don't really mind..."

The woman besides me on the driver's seat showed no sign of being tense. Despite being the passenger, I was way more tense than she.

"Is something wrong?"

"Uh? Ah, um, you changed your clothes, didn't you?" I made up a lie on the spot because I couldn't confess that I was scared shitless of her driving. That she had changed her clothes wasn't incorrect - she had switched out of her maid uniform into casual wear: a yellow dress with a cardigan.

"Yes, my maid outfit isn't exactly suitable for going outside."

Come to think of it, she had been wearing regular clothes when we first met in the shop.

At this point, I recalled the scene that "Vision" had shown me once more.

My attention had been focused on the remarkable room Mei had collapsed in, but in fact, there was another unusual clue - her clothing. The frilly outfit she had worn was a maid uniform.

"Um, do you always change your clothes when you leave the house?"

"Of course! I only wear that uniform at home."

Just at home? Meaning that she's going to die at home, too?

"But I can't walk around like that in our city residence, either."

"Eh? What do you mean by that?"

"The mansion here is just for work, but he also has an apartment in the city. However, the noise from the other apartments bothers him so much that he'll only work here or at the studio."

"What does that apartment look like?"

"Eh?"

"Um, you see, I was wondering what the living space of a music composer looks like. Maybe like a room in one of those trendy designer residences[3]? Maybe there'll be eccentric designs all over the walls and doors?"

"I wouldn't say it's anything special, though... Ah, perhaps you read that recently published interview," Mei-san interjected. "He only did that thing one time, long ago!"

"What?"

"Huh? Weren't you talking about the incident when he came up with a good idea for a piece, but couldn't find any paper to write on? The story where he ended up composing on the walls after drawing lines on them?"

"Ah, y-yes! Exactly! That's what I meant."

I see. Those lines in my Vision might have been drawn by Kadokura-san as substitutes for sheets of music.

"It was a terrible pain to clean them off, believe me!" she smiled wryly and suddenly stopped the car. The car came to a halt with a jerk.

"Mh? What's wrong?" I asked.

Looking at me with a troubled face, she answered, "... Excuse me. It looks like the wheels got caught in a ditch."

It was horrible.

Because the wheels got stuck in a ditch, I had to push the car from behind while Mei-san stayed behind the wheel and stepped on the gas. Actually, it wasn't that hard to get the car out of the ditch, but in return I got a

full-fledged mud shower. My mouth literally felt gritty with sand.

It took us longer than expected to make it to the station , but I was still on track to make the appointment as my train was just arriving.

For these two hours of work I was going to receive 10,000 yen, which was quite a good deal. All that remained was handing over the CDs and returning to the mansion. Mei-san was going to pick me up at the train station on my way back.

After I had arrived at the client's company and explained my business to the receptionist, she led me to a conference room. After a while, someone knocked on the door and came in. It was a man in a suit who was about thirty years old. The fact that he was working on a Sunday kind of made me feel bad for him.

"Sorry for making you wait. Kadokura-san has informed me about the matter at hand."

"Ah, yes. This is what I'm supposed to deliver."

I opened the bag to take out the CDs. However...

"Huh?"

There were only two CDs in the bag. I placed them on the table and further scrutinized the bag. However, there was nothing else to be seen.

"We gave Kadokura-san these two CDs. There was no real need to return them, but I take it he forgot to give you the CD that actually matters? Now isn't that clumsy of him? Or did the girl that's helping him out slip up? Oh well, there's still time until the deadline, so just come back some other time. I'll get in touch with Kadokura-san and let him know. Now if you'll excuse me, I've still got some work to do." He clapped me on the shoulder and left the room.

This can't be. I made sure of the contents when I got the bag. The CD was in there. What's going on...?

"Ah!" I burst out.

There was a hole in the bag.

By the time I got back, night had already fallen.

I hadn't noticed that hole. Did I drop the CD somewhere? But I didn't hear anything. Did I simply not notice?

The CD wasn't at the lost-property office at the station. I also searched the route from the station to the client's company several times on foot, but had no luck. I checked the route between the station and the mansion, but found nothing there either. It figured - I had been in a car, after all. But I didn't remember that simple fact until I was back at the mansion again—I even forgot that Mei-san was supposed to pick me up at the train station.

Kadokura-san was waiting for me and led me to the basement as soon as I returned.

"The client gave me a call and brought me up to date. Care to explain?" he muttered quietly, but with clear tones of anger in his voice.

"You see, there was a hole in the bag..."

"You dropped it."

"...Apparently."

I wanted to deny it, but I had nothing to back me up. It wasn't my fault that there was a hole in the bag. However, once I accepted the delivery task, I should have checked.

"How are you going to make up for this?!"

"I'm sorry. I'll deliver the CD again tomorrow. I'll ask Towako-san to lend you the mirror for one more day."

"You're missing the point!" He shook his head fiercely. "That was the only sample. There's no copy!"

"What...?"

"I'm not at fault here! There was no time. *You* were the one rushing me. You told me that I only had until tomorrow, so I fell in line. Who could have expected that you'd lose the only copy?"

"Can't you reproduce it one more time?"

That question rubbed him the wrong way.

"You're quite the genius, aren't you? Make the same thing one more time you say? You may think that's

possible since I created it once, but it's not that simple. A composition is defined the moment it is created. It is impossible to perfectly reproduce the same piece of music!"

"...I'm sorry."

"Do you think you can make up for it just by apologizing? Besides, what if someone picks up that CD and sells it as his own creation? I may be called an imitator if I re-created my composition and that happened. Do you realize what this means? That composition will count for nothing!" With an enraged look, he got into my face. "How will you compensate me for this?"

"...What do you want?"

"Would a student like you even be able to afford the monetary damages?"

I couldn't even dream of paying the number that he stated.

But if that's the only way...

"However, we can make a trade if you want."

"Eh?"

"A trade. I'm already wealthy, so even a monetary settlement wouldn't make me whole."

"And what would be the trade?"

At the time I was so discombobulated that I didn't even have an inkling of what was going on.

"The mirror!" His anger subsided abruptly. "Give me the 'Mirror of Serenity'. In that case, I'll turn a blind eye to this incident."

"......!"

He'd tricked me.

The delivery he had asked me to make. The hole in the bag. The CD without any copies.

He had deliberately arranged the entire scenario. Everything had happened in accordance with his plan to obtain the "Mirror of Serenity."

"How does that sound? You have no use for that mirror anyway, right? Isn't that a great deal?"

"...I'll find it."

"What did you say?"

"I'll go and find that CD."

"Boy..."

"As we've told you repeatedly, we don't intend to give it to you. Towako-san said so, and I have to follow suit."

"Oh my, you're a really sore loser. I don't mind if you go and search for it, but you'd better find it before the deadline. If you don't..."

"If I don't find it, I'll pay for the damages! Even if it takes a lifetime!"

"Well said, Tokiya."

We turned toward the voice that came from the entrance. It was Towako-san, followed by Saki and Mei-san, who was trying to stop them.

"Settsu-san, listen, he lost..."

"Stop right there. I'm not here to listen to your cheap cock-and-bull story." She walked to my side and poked me in the head. "Jeez, don't be such a sap."

"I'm sorry. Trust me, I'll definitely find..."

"It's no use. You're not going to find it. If it's all a trick to obtain the mirror, the CD isn't going to be lying around somewhere."

"Aren't you a bit too overbearing?" he said as he glared at her.

"Now that's what I call a shameless thief. But very well ."

Towako-san approached the "Mirror of Serenity" and tossed it carelessly to him. Eager to keep it from falling, Kadokura-san hurriedly caught it and hugged it close.

"Go ahead and treat it like your child."

"Eh?"

"It's yours." She lifted a corner of her mouth sardonically and fixed her gaze on him. "As you said, we

can't make good use of this mirror. There is only one reason I didn't give it to you despite that: because this mirror is going to hurt both of you."

"Do harm? To me?"

"'To me'? Is that what I said? But suit yourself. I'm not going repeat myself. If you really overheard it, you shall live to regret it. I'm no fortune-teller, really, but this development was utterly predictable."

Towako-san turned around and left the room. Saki followed suit, but I didn't know whether to leave as well or not.

Our objective had not been fulfilled yet.

I looked at Mei-san. Our eyes met and she quickly averted her gaze.

Meaning that she had nothing to talk to us about, we who had insulted Kadokura-san, not knowing the circumstances?

I followed Towako-san out of the room. But there was one thing I could not hold back.

"Please don't go anywhere near doors with lines on them. Otherwise something bad will happen."

I couldn't see her face as I said that.

They left with a cheap parting shot.

I didn't care. Not at all. As long as the "Mirror of Serenity" remained in my hands.

"...Haha... Ha... Hahahahahaha!"

I burst out in irrepressible laughter. I had no idea when I had last laughed so heartily. I was overjoyed - I felt happier than when I became popular enough to release my first record.

After I was done laughing, I felt Mei's gaze on me.

"What's wrong? Everything went well, so laugh with me!"

"...Yes."

But she didn't even smile.

"What's with that gloomy face? Didn't you agree with me that if I owned it, the mirror would be in better hands?"

"...Yes."

But she still didn't smile.

"Whatever. Give it to me."

"...Yes."

"Give the CD to me!"

"Ah, yes."

She came to and took a CD out of her pocket. It goes without saying that it was my composition.

I had ordered Mei to filch the CD under some pretext and cut a hole in the bag. Of course there had been never been any need to deliver the CD. I could have just sent the file via e-mail .

The entire delivery had been a scam I'd arranged to obtain the "Mirror of Serenity."

I recalled the words of the woman who had told me about the mirror.

While her figure had only left a faint impression on me and I could hardly recall her face, her words had remained vividly imprinted on my memory.

But I'm sure you will be able to obtain it if you wish. Relics naturally find their way to an appropriate owner—

Now that I thought about it, that encounter was my first step toward the mirror. No, even that was just yet another inevitable event that would lead me to the "Mirror of Serenity".

"Um..." Mei mumbled, still wearing a gloomy expression, and stood before me.

"What is it?"

"Um... it doesn't have to be right away, one day is fine, but after you have gotten out of your slump, could you please return the..."

A dry sound rang through the soundproof room.

Mei fell to the floor, holding the cheek I had slapped.

"Do you care more about them? Would you rather side with people you've only known for a few days than someone you've known almost forever?"

"I'm not 'siding' with them. But deceiving them is..."

"Shut up!"

I yanked her to her feet and drove her out of the studio.

"That's enough. I want to be alone. Go upstairs. And don't disturb me! ...No, slip up as much as you want! After all, I've got the 'Mirror of Serenity'."

I closed the door and pulled the cloth off *my* "Mirror of Serenity."

I was surrounded by complete silence.

We got on a train and headed home.

One day earlier than planned.

Towako-san had me explain everything: that I was asked to make a delivery; that Mei-san brought me to the station and that the CD was gone by the time I got to the client's company; that I searched everywhere on my way back but didn't find anything.

"I see."

"I just don't understand how I lost it."

While looking out of the window, Towako-san yawned and said, "obviously that maid stole it."

"No way..."

"Really? If you only left the bag alone at one point, then that's the logical conclusion, isn't it?"

Towako-san didn't even consider the possibility that I had dropped it, so she arrived at that conclusion.

"The maid would do anything for that guy, right?" she added.

I see. So feelings of guilt had caused Mei-san to avert her eyes?

Saki suddenly broke her silence.

"Tokiya."

"Mh?"

"You said something to her right before we left. Did you find the place you saw in your 'Vision?'"

"No, I just told her to avoid doors with lines drawn on them."

In the end, we had found no proof of anything. Besides , I assumed that the lines had yet to be drawn on the door from my "Vision," though I had no proof of that either.

"Stop fretting. Whatever happens is their own fault."

Towako-san had a rather detached view. Since they had abused her goodwill after she generously lent them the "Mirror of Serenity," I could understand why she wouldn't feel any pity for them.

Nonetheless, I couldn't think that way.

Despite what had happened, I prayed for Mei-san's safety.

...I was filled with remorse as I realized that a quick prayer was all I had done for her.

Why is saving others so difficult?

"Tokiya. The next station is five minutes away," Saki suddenly blurted out.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just letting you know that we're arriving at the next station in five minutes. It's up to you to do something meaningful."

Something meaningful? What could I possibly do?

Would getting off the train be a meaningful act? Not in and of itself, but if I followed up with the right choices, I would have accomplished something meaningful.

At any rate, I would definitely not accomplish anything by just going home.

"You want to save her, don't you?"

The vision of Mei-san's death crossed my mind.

Why did we make this trip in the first place? Wasn't it to save her? That mistake had weakened my resolve. It's still too early to give up. There's no reason to give up.

I looked at Towako-san.

"Don't look at me."

She kept gazing out of the window.

"I'm off."

I stood up and headed for the door.

I came to.

The sheet music before me was covered with notes.

The clock revealed that it was already morning. I had completed an entire composition in a single, uninterrupted stretch. This was a first for me.

I looked at the "Mirror of Serenity". It was no doubt there.

It was mine now.

With its help I was going to make a breakthrough.

I raised my head. I was expecting Mei to make some noise, but I didn't hear anything. Usually her noises just annoyed me, but now I found myself missing them a little and feeling a bit sad.

I was completely calm, as if the "Mirror of Serenity" also ensured a serene mind.

Suddenly, my stomach started growling.

Come to think of it, I haven't eaten anything since yesterday because I couldn't stop composing.

I left the room to get some breakfast.

"Mh?"

I saw something out of the corner of my eye and turned back toward the door.

"What's that?"

A vast number of lines were drawn all over the door in all directions.

This wasn't here yesterday. What's going on?

Mei could probably tell me.

I went upstairs to the ground floor, but there was nobody in the living room or the kitchen.

Odd. Has that girl overslept?

Suddenly, a memo on the table caught my eye.

"What...?"

I read the memo and was left speechless.

Mei's funeral ended with no fanfare.

She didn't rise from the dead, and I didn't follow her into death. Really, it ended with no fanfare at all. It... just ended.

And so my daily life started again.

The world moved on as if nothing had happened, and so did I.

I opened the door to my mansion.

I had been staying in my city apartment for some time since it was a lot more convenient.

It was the first time I had been here in a week.

I felt no nostalgia.

Not because it had only been a week, but because it didn't feel like a place I had lived in.

At the same time, this was clearly the house I had lived in, and there was only one thing missing.

"So that's why...?"

I realized why it didn't feel like home anymore.

The answer was pretty obvious.

Even if there was something missing—even if I had lost something—it was still nothing but a house.

I headed straight to my underground studio.

There were countless lines on the door.

Drawn by Mei.

Unable to endure the pain from the heart attack that eventually took her life, she sought my help. However, no matter how many times she called out, there was no answer. At the time, I had been using the "Mirror of Serenity," so there was no way her voice could reach me.

She had repeatedly banged on the door to make her presence known.

She had scratched at the door countless times because of her pain.

Her hands were an awful sight. Banging on the door had made them bleed internally, her nails were cracked and torn from the scratching, and her fingertips were covered in blood.

But I hadn't noticed anything.

I hadn't noticed until the very end.

No, I hadn't noticed from the very start.

According to the doctor, signs of her condition had already manifested earlier on.

There were several things that came to mind.

Her knocking over cups, her dropping spoons and forks, and her sudden falls. None of this had been caused by clumsiness or scatterbrained behavior.

Most likely, a sudden pain in her heart had caused her to stop moving.

I hadn't noticed. She had deceived me to the very end.

Why didn't she tell me?

Even someone like me would have lent her an ear.

...No, I *had* listened to her with my very own ears. I had heard the signs that called attention to her suffering. I had been able to hear those signs that no one else could hear.

I shut out those signs, which could cut through any soundproofing, by using the "Mirror of Serenity".

Because this mirror is going to hurt both of you—

I recalled Settsu-san's words.

I had not understood their meaning. I had only thought of myself.

Even though her warning had been addressed to everyone near the "Mirror of Serenity"...

I averted my gaze from the door and entered the studio. After I closed the door, the room was filled with silence.

At first, I thought the mirror was still active, but it was tipped over.

Oh. When there's no one else around, it gets this quiet, I thought vaguely. Perhaps I had just obtained the silence I had been seeking.

I closed my eyes.

I pictured the world of sounds.

"....."

I closed my eyes once more.

I pictured the world of sounds once more.

"....."

It was useless.

I wanted to escape into that world. But I couldn't.

Why. Why is it so—

"Noisy—!"

I opened my eyes.

There was nothing.

There was no one there.

I had figured as much.

Yet it was noisy.

This world felt so noisy it was deafening.

This world, though no one was present, felt noisier than anything I had ever experienced.

I would never have imagined that a silence without a single person or thing present could be so noisy.

...No, I knew this. Didn't I know this kind of silence already ?

It was then that I remembered.

Finally, after all so long, I remembered.

I recalled the circumstances of my first slump, which occurred shortly after I had left home.

It was quite similar to what had happened this time.

My nerves were frayed because of the deafening, overly silent silence.

The one who saved me from it was Mei, who had followed me.

She had saved me from the silence.

But despite all she had done for me, I distanced myself from her and tried to create silence.

Nevertheless, she had stayed by my side.

I looked up at the ceiling.

I focused on what was beyond it.

But there was no one there.

There was only a perfectly void silence.

The girl who had created a cozy and warm silence for me was no longer here.

After we returned to Kadokura-san's mansion, we saw Mei-san collapsed in front of the door of his underground studio. The door was covered with countless scratches.

We immediately called an ambulance, but she had already passed away.

We called out to Kadokura-san several times, but he didn't react at all.

Most likely, Mei-san had desperately called out to him as well. She had sought his help while enduring a pain so excruciating that she scratched the door over and over, but she hadn't been able to reach him.

He had surely been using the "Mirror of Serenity."

He did return the mirror to us. While we never saw him directly again, Saki found the mirror in front of the shop one day.

Since that day, I had not heard of any new compositions by Kadokura-san.

I don't know what he's doing now.

My guess is that his regret kept him from moving on.

But I also felt regret.

Over and over, I thought about what-ifs like what if I hadn't left his mansion, or returned earlier, or hadn't given the mirror to Kadokura-san in the first place.

"It was her fate. You couldn't do anything about it," Towako-san said in response to her death.

I don't know if she was being honest, or if she was just trying to make me feel better.

It may sound naïve, but if that was fate, then I wanted to change it.

I couldn't achieve anything despite knowing the future .

I couldn't achieve anything despite knowing someone would die.

I couldn't make a difference back then even though I returned to Kadokura-san's mansion.

But one day, I thought, *I will find a way to overcome fate.*

1. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsukumogami
2. ↑ Literally "Name is omen." Implies that a name is fitting for an object or person. Saki's name is written as 舞, which can be translated as "Blossom of the dancing field." Also see Nominative determinism
3. ↑ A type of apartment building that places more value on design than usability.

Chapter 2 - Self

Have you ever wished that you existed twice?

I'm not talking about twins or anything like that. I'm talking about a second "you" who can stand in for you.

Come to think of it, there was a *copy-robot* in a famous anime show[1] that I used to watch when I was a child.

In order to act as a mysterious superhero, the protagonist made the robot go to elementary school in his place. The robot had some amazing abilities: it had free will, would act independently, and could then share its memories with the protagonist.

If you had access to something like that, you could make it do your homework when you felt tired, go to school when you weren't in the mood, or earn money for you to fritter away on whatever you wanted.

Aah, that would be so convenient.

It does sound like you'd be acting like a pretty nasty slave-driver, but that's not really the case. After all, the two of you share everything - fun and not-so-fun - at the end of the day.

Mh? Then take on the not-so-fun stuff yourself, you say?

...Now that's a whole other kettle of fish.

Well, there’s no point in daydreaming. Possessing something like that would be too good to be true, and even if it were possible, there’d bound to be some kind of catch.

"I'm back."

"Ya," I said as I paused the game I was playing and turned to the person who had just entered the room.

It was a high school student. He had just come back from school, so he was still wearing his uniform and carrying the official school satchel. His short haircut, sun-tanned skin, and strong build suggested that he played a lot of sports.

If there were a third person in the room, he would have been flabbergasted.

The face of that student looked identical to mine. Not similar, but the exact same.

And our faces weren’t the only things that were identical—our body sizes, haircuts, shoulder widths, weights, skin tones, leg lengths, shoe sizes—everything was the same.

We weren't identical twins. Even so-called “identical” twins look similar at best, and aren’t actually identical.

Our appearances, however, were exactly the same in every respect.

He was like my mirror image, which is why I called him " copy."

"Give me the satchel."

After taking the satchel from my copy, I rummaged in it for a manga that had just come out today. I had commanded him to buy it for me on his way home. When I took the manga out, I accidentally snagged a sheet of paper, which then fell to the ground.

"What's that?"

"The results from the quiz I told you about yesterday."

"Did you mention it to me?"

I took a look at it. Next to my name, Jirou Kishitani, was a 100. It was a perfect score.

"Not bad at all."

"The test covered the stuff we studied yesterday. It paid off, didn't it?"

"You're the one who studied, though."

But I get all the credit. Heh, looks like I can look forward to my report card this year.

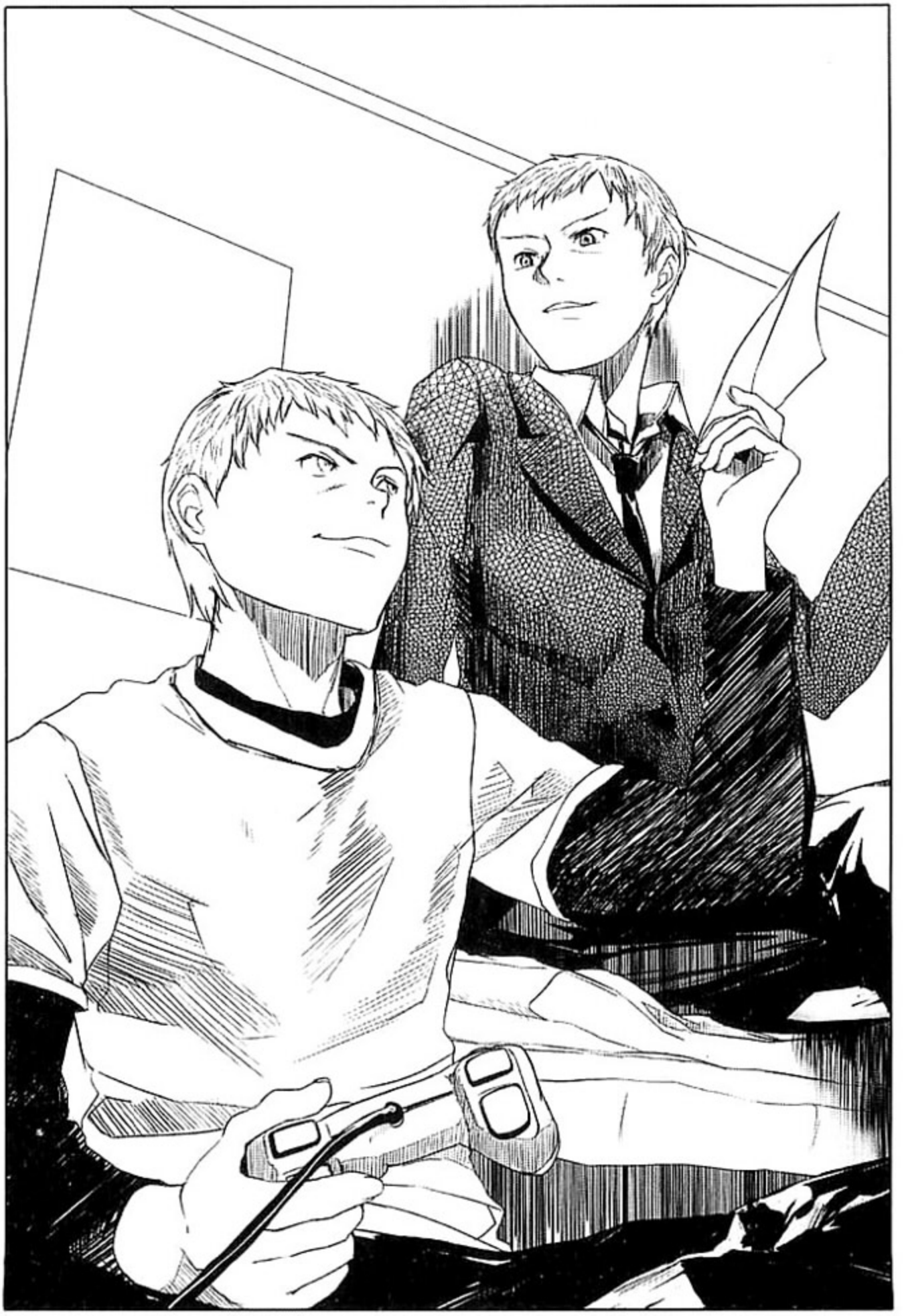
I tossed the sheet away and threw myself onto my bed with the new manga. My copy picked up the sheet and sat down where I had been sitting.

"Oh? You made a lot of progress, didn't you?" he suddenly said as he looked at the TV screen.

I'd been gaming all day while my copy was at school. Of course I made some decent progress.

Cause both my parents work from the early morning 'till late at night, there's no one who would bitch at me for skipping school. No, I was at school, I guess? Or rather, my copy was. But practically speaking, it's the same thing.

"Train my characters while I'm reading this manga!"



"I don't mind, but let's share our memories before you start reading manga."

My copy refers to himself as "boku,"[2] but that’s only when he's with me, of course. I had also made him change his manner of speaking a bit. I would feel really awkward if we talked the exact same way. After those small tweaks, I no longer felt like I was talking to myself and could relax.

My copy got on the bed, lay on top of me and touched his forehead to mine.

It was a sight that could easily be misunderstood. But we weren't doing anything questionable; this was how I could turn the memories of my copy into my own.

While I collected myself, I felt something flowing into my head. It was the memories my copy had experienced that day.

I saw that he went to school and attended classes. He surprised everyone with the full mark he had received on the short test. Figures—I haven't gotten a full mark in my entire life. That’s unsurprising, because I never did my homework properly, let alone prepared myself properly for school. It was kind of funny to see the reactions of the teacher and the other students.

There was also a scene that stood out from my club activities, where he played soccer. I saw him score an amazing

goal in a practice game. The goalie was a guy from the first-string team who I couldn't stand. He was gnashing his teeth. Glorious. After that, my copy went to a convenience store, bought my manga, and came home.

"Man, you rock." I had to praise him after seeing that test score and his soccer playing.

My copy got off me and smiled wryly.

"Is that self-praise?"

"Oh, looks like it is. You're me after all, aren't you?"

I couldn't explain what on earth he was.

I could only say that he was my copy.

A copy that looked the same as me and had the same skills. One who did things like going to school, studying, and training my game characters for me.

It's like there were two of me.

But while he was me, he somehow wasn't me.

He was a version of me who had to obey my every command.

What a convenient tool I had gotten my hands on.

I could do whatever I wanted. I never had to do anything boring or annoying anymore.

Ever since I had obtained that tool, my life had been fulfilled.

The manga scene I was reading wasn't particularly funny, but I couldn't stop laughing.

Ah, right. Gotta make him do today's homework.

"Nhaaa," I yawned as I watched the match.

It was one to one with five minutes remaining. I guessed it would end in a draw.

The motivated players were fighting hard for control of the ball, while the unmotivated players like me just watched from afar.

Some background: PE today was a soccer match.

"Kurusu, the ball!"

"Gotcha!"

The ball was kicked toward me. I just wanted to pass it to a teammate and be done with it, but Kishitani, an opposing player, stole the ball from me and dribbled around me toward the goal.

"Kurusu, get your act together!"

Even though my teammates were complaining, I didn't run after him. My opponent was in the soccer club; even if I managed to catch up with him, I wouldn't be able to steal back the ball. As if to further bolster my decision, Kishitani easily dodged the defenders, one after another.

"Man, how childish can you get? That guy's in the soccer club and still gives it 110%..."

"The guys he's beating are in the soccer club too," said my teammate Shinjou as he approached me.

He was right - the players opposing Kishitani were also members of the same soccer club, but utterly failed to regain the ball.

"Heh, believe it or not, he's actually restraining himself !"

"Really? I mean, look, they've already got nothing on him!"

"He used to be a good-for-nothing who would just rush onto the opponent's side of the field like an idiot, but he's become incredible lately! He's been practicing like a different person, and keeps at it alone, even when everyone else had gone home. I guess something made him turn over a new leaf? I've heard that by now even the seniors on the first-string team have a hard time stealing the ball from him."

When the defense finally seemed about to overwhelm him with sheer numbers, he skilfully passed the ball to a teammate.

"He's even started to do some decent team play - like just now."

"Has he only improved lately?"

"Yeah. He's like a totally different person."

"Like a different person, eh?" I said while gazing at Kishitani, who was running toward our goal.

Right before time ran out, Kishitani received a pass and slammed the ball into the net.

"The losing team's in charge of clearing up!" announced the teacher right after he had blown the final whistle.

Back at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, Saki served us some black tea. She asked "so did you discover anything? "

"Yeah, I've narrowed down my list of suspects considerably."

"I see."

After I sat down next to Saki, Towako-san entered from the living room and plopped down before the counter, waiting for me to elaborate.

About a week ago, Towako-san had told me that someone in my school had a Relic.

Apparently, when she dropped by our sister shop, she happened to notice a customer who was wearing my school's uniform. The owner of the sister shop told Towako-san that he had bought a Relic.

The name of the Relic was 'Masquerade', and as the name suggests, it looked like a mask. When that white and expressionless mask was placed on a doll or mannequin, the mask would transform it into a perfect copy of the user. It would not only have the same appearance, but also the same skills and personality as the user.

The user was at risk of becoming so lazy that his ability to interact with society would be lost. He might start to unload even the smallest of tasks onto his copy if he kept using *Masquerade*, which would lead to his ruin.

That being said, at first I wanted to ignore this incident because I thought that someone just getting lazy was hardly a real problem, and that it would serve him right if he ruined himself due to laziness.

But I couldn't get it off my mind, so I ended up unobtrusively observing my classmates.

In addition to a school badge, our uniforms also had class badges that displayed the students' school years by color and the class number as well. Towako-san had not clearly seen the customer's face, but she had seen his class badge. It happened to be the same as mine.

Considering the power of *Masquerade*, it was highly unlikely that I could distinguish the copy from the real thing – after all, it was a perfect copy. Nevertheless, I was on the lookout for the even the slightest trace of strange behavior.

And after observing my class for a week, I had drawn the following conclusion:

Kishitani was definitely suspicious.

"I'm back."

I woke up to the greeting of my copy.

"Ah, sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"No, it's cool. I can sleep all day, after all."

It seemed that my afternoon nap had gotten quite long.

It figures. Lately, I've basically been sleeping in the day and active at night.

"I've got good news for you today!" my copy said as he approached me with a smile on his face.

"What is it? Tell me more."

"Best just see it for yourself!"

My copy pressed his forehead against mine and started the memory sharing process.

It was just the normal school scenery. By now, I didn't consider flawlessly answering every question the teacher posed or getting a high score on a quiz particularly good news anymore.

What exactly is he so happy about? I thought right before the memories of that day's club activities entered my mind. I was similarly unimpressed: neither his skillful shots, nor the fact that he was practicing with the first-string players impressed me.

Suddenly, he was called out by our coach.

"You’re on the starting lineup in the match tomorrow. Don't let me down!"

Even though we were still in the middle of sharing our memories, I immediately jerked my head back. My copy gave me a triumphant smile.

"In the starting lineup for tomorrow's match?"

"That's right!"

That was the first time I was selected for the first string. Considering that I hadn't even entered a real game thus far, suddenly being added to the starting lineup was a great leap forward. All those efforts had paid off.

"Okay, I'll go to school tomorrow."

"Eh?" my copy uttered with wide eyes.

"What? Got a problem with that?"

"N-No, I don't... but are you all right?"

"If you were all right, how could I not be? After all, we're the same, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we are."

"Okay, now that that's decided, time to get some sleep." I got on my bed again and added "Prepare yourself for tomorrow ! You better not forget about any of your regular preparations."

"Hah...hah...hah..."

I was gasping for breath, and about to collapse from a lack of oxygen. I was trembling so hard that I couldn't stand up without supporting my knees with my hands.

"Here goes!"

I received a pass from a senior player, but could not take another step. Just as the ball passed the goal line, the final whistle was blown. I somehow managed to stagger back to the bench.

"W-Water...," I groaned as I plopped down on the ground, holding my hand out to our team manager.

That manager, however, ignored me completely and handed out towels to the other players.

"Hey, what're ya doing? Get my some water!" I ordered a second-string team member standing nearby from my year. He reluctantly brought me a water bottle, which I whipped out of his hand and greedily drank from.

Ah, that really hits the spot. I didn't think that the playing on the first string would be so hard; man, I was about to die! I haven't gotten that much exercise in ages. Well, I haven't really been doing much lately, because I pushed all that kind of stuff onto my copy.

While my copy could share his memories with me, he couldn’t apparently do the same with physical fitness.

I had really been looking forward to this Saturday’s match… but the first half had ended with almost no achievements on my part.

"What's wrong, Kishitani?" our coach said as he approached me. "Where's your commitment today?"

"I-I'm sorry. I didn’t get enough sleep..."

That wasn't a lie. While I had intended to go to sleep right after I heard about the game from my copy, I hadn't been able to sleep a wink because I already been asleep for too long during the day.

"I see. Well, I guess you've gotten a bit overanxious about the game because this is your first real match."

"I'm sorry."

"Got it. I'll sub in someone else for the second half."

I was relieved: I couldn't walk another step. Playing the second half would have been pure hell.

"I'll give you one more chance during tomorrow’s match. Make sure you get enough sleep tonight, okay? Well, I guess you'll sleep like a log since you look completely worn out."

Tomorrow? You wanna make me go through that pain again on Sunday...?

I slumped down all the way, and couldn't even imagine standing up.

"How was it?" my copy immediately asked after I got back.

"It was terrible! Dammit..."

After throwing down my satchel with some difficulty, I slumped onto my bed.

"Looks like it didn't go well, huh?"

"Oh just shut up. Have you trained my characters at least?"

"I have! All day."

I looked at the TV screen and saw that they had gained roughly thirty levels. Those PC’s sure had it good—they didn't get exhausted no matter how long they fought.

"...The coach said he wants to put me on the starting lineup tomorrow, too!"

"He did? But that's good news, isn't it?"

"You go."

"Huh? May I?"

"Yeah. I'm fed up with this—it’s such a pain. Besides, I think my muscles will be killing me tomorrow. Anyway, make sure you kick their asses, okay? You better not suck!"

"My skills are your skills."

I wanted to ask if he was being sarcastic, but I was just too damn tired.

I fell into a sound sleep right away.

I momentarily thought to pool our memories, but my overwhelming desire to get some sleep immediately killed that idea.

"Hey, how was it?" I immediately asked after my copy got back from the match.

I didn't mean to imitate him—I was genuinely curious. I hadn't even been able to focus on playing my video game all day.

"Not bad, I guess."

My copy brought his forehead toward me. I touched mine to his and started to receive the memories of the match.

Just as I was yesterday, he was on the starting lineup as a forward. The coach slapped him on the back, reminding him to do better this time. Even though it was only a memory of something that had already happened, I got kinda tense.

The match started.

I don't want to admit it, but unlike me, my copy ran around up and down the field quick as a flash. Of course, that reassured me that I'd have been able to do just as well had I not been so exhausted.

He ran with perfect timing in order to receive a pass from a senior. Just before the offside line, he took control of the ball and rushed toward the goal, leaving the opposing defense in his dust.

Shoot! I shouted in my heart.

Our thoughts were in sync; my copy slammed the ball home just as I shouted. The ball brushed the fingertips of the goalie and went straight into the net.

My seniors ran to my copy to congratulate me and pat me on the back, while our coach nodded approvingly.

It felt great.

In the end, we won the match by three to one. My copy really kicked some ass – he scored one goal and made two assists.

"Well done!" I praised him after I had viewed all of the memories. "'Not bad'? Come on! That was kick-ass!"

"As I said, that's self-praise!"

"I guess you're right. Man! I would have been able to do the same yesterday if I hadn't been so tired..."

"It doesn't matter—my achievements are your achievements !"

He was right. It may have been me yesterday and my copy today, but from anyone else's perspective, it was me both times .

Since our skills were identical, I would have been capable of the same success if I had gone today. Well, if I had really gone today, I would have had a hard time moving due to my sore muscles, but that's neither here nor there.

Besides, my copy and I were sharing our memories; I could perfectly recall that day's match. I could practically remember the feel of the ball when I scored that goal.

I suddenly felt as if I had just smashed the ball into the net and raised my arms like my copy had back then.

"Ouch-owowow!"

The sore muscles all over my body pulled me back to reality . They were actually doing much better now; in the morning I hadn't even been able to stand up.

"Don't overstrain yourself and get some sleep!" my copy said.

"Yeah, good idea. I'm sure I'll have nice dreams tonight."

I don't like Mondays.

The thought that a whole new week has just started depresses me, and I can't help but count the days until the weekend.

I entered the classroom just as the bell rang and noticed that it was rather noisy.

Shinjou's desk was in front of mine, so as I sat down, I asked him "What's the matter?"

"Do you mean that?" he said as he pointed to a gaggle of girls. The classroom noise appeared to be centered there. "Kishitani scored a goal and made two assists in the first-string match yesterday, you know. Now the girls are going wild because the team manager just told them about it."

As Shinjou had said, Kishitani was standing in their midst, getting praised from all sides and blushing with modesty.

I had never seen him act that way before. While Kishitani is not loathed by the girls, he was also far from popular because of his crude and over-confident personality.

I fixed my gaze on him.

Of course he looked the same as always, like a perfectly normal human. He in no way resembled a copy created by *Masquerade*. Of course, it was also possible that the real Kishitani was in front of me right now, though.

"This sucks," muttered Shinjou in a displeased tone. He was also in the soccer club.

"And? How did you do?"

"One goal and one assist."

"Hey, that’s not half bad!"

"It was a match among farm teams."

I see. Life sure can be cruel.

"Sorry everyone—! Please give me a moment!" the class representative called from the teacher's platform. The chattering subsided and the students' attention focused on the representative. "Today's first period is self-study because the teacher is absent due to illness."

After a moment's silence, a wave of cheer spread in the classroom.

"So I thought we might just as well change the desk assignments now, and not after school as originally scheduled. Is everyone okay with this?"

Right away, sir! a few students responded like elementary school students.The students who didn't reply weren't opposing the plan, either. Of course, I was perfectly happy to avoid staying after school, too.

"Okay, then please go to your seats."

The students sat down at their respective desks.

"We'll draw lots to determine the new desks. As I informed you beforehand, the absent students will be allotted the free desks. Is that okay?"

The class representative was obviously not playing dumb or really expecting an answer from someone who was not here; it was just a judgment by default.

As I was looking at the desks around me, I suddenly noticed that one had remained free. There seemed to be one absent person, but I couldn't immediately name who it was.

"Hey, who's the guy that's missing?" I asked Shinjou.

"Huh? The assignments are complete, aren't they? Ah, you mean that desk?" he nodded when he saw the desk that I was pointing at.

Apparently, I wasn't the only who was wondering about that empty seat. Here and there, I heard people asking who had sat there.

"That desk belongs to a guy called Sagara. He’s never shown up even once, though."

Now that he mentioned it, I remembered hearing such a name sometime during the beginning of the school term. I had forgotten all about it because our teacher had stopped calling his name when checking the attendance list.

"Is it just me or is that desk kinda unnecessary?"

"Dispose of it before we draw lots then!"

"Why don't we just put a doll there?"

A few students started making jokes, causing a bout of laughter.

But their laughter was interrupted by a roar.

"Watch your tongue!"

A deep silence fell, and everyone’s gaze focused on the person who had yelled out.

It was Kishitani. He had stood up when he spoke out, but after bathing in the surprised gazes of his classmates for a few moments, he sat down again without saying anything further.

"You should hardly be one to talk!" Shinjou hissed silently while glaring at Kishitani.

"What do you mean?"

"Sagara stopped coming to school because of Kishitani, you know?"

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. It's a pretty famous story in our soccer club! Kishitani forced him to do various chores, like buying him drinks, under the pretext that it would help Sagara train his body. And he's rumored to have done even nastier stuff to Sagara in private. But it looks like bullies forget about their bullying in no time flat, eh? Or did his success make him a different person? Meh, just meh."

A different person, huh.

Indeed, I had similar thoughts.

But I was still unable to say for sure that Kishitani's personality change was due to *Masquerade*.

"The personality?"

I had asked Towako-san again about the characteristics of *Masquerade* upon arriving at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

More specifically, I had asked if it's possible for the copy to have a different personality than the original.

Lately, people often mentioned that Kishitani was like a different person, and because he had changed for the better, those changes had mostly been well received. I, on the other hand, couldn't help but smell a rat.

"To put it simply, the personality is the same as the original's."

"...I see..."

"You don't look convinced, eh?"

"Well, yeah."

"That being said, it depends on what you mean by a ' changed personality.'"

"What do you mean?"

"You see, your impression of someone else's personality can easily change," Towako-san said, and shifted her position on the chair before getting into detail . "Kishitani, was it? Let's use him as an example. Pretend that he ignores you when you try to talk to him because he's in a bad mood; what would you think? Wouldn't you think that he's an antisocial fellow?"

"Most likely."

"Now pretend someone else tries to talk to him. However, this time Kishitani happens to be in a very good mood and responds to this person's approach with a smile. In that case, would that person also consider Kishitani antisocial?"

"No, I guess not."

"At the end of the day, our ability to judge others' personalities is pretty poor: our evaluations flip back and forth depending on timing and circumstances—or what you already think of the other party."

"I guess you've got a point there..."

"Anyways, let's get back to *Masquerade*. As I mentioned before, the copy's personality is exactly the same as the user's. Even if everyone else is bewildered by something atypical that his copy has done, the user would certainly act the same way if the circumstances and his mental state were the same. They are also identical in terms of skill, so his copy can't do anything that Kishitani is incapable of, and it can do everything that Kishitani can do."

The sudden spike in his soccer skills didn't bother me. Kishitani might have been able to improve through sheer effort.

What bothered me was that Kishitani would almost certainly fail to make an effort to improve.

I had once taken a retest together with him, which made for a good example.

The reason some people pass an exam and others fail it , despite attending the same classes and taking the same test is plainly and simply the difference in effort. Every student has been confronted with the same problems when he cleared the entrance exam. Everything after that point is just a matter of effort.

The guys who make an effort rise in the ranking, while the guys who goof off fall down the charts.

Kishitani used to fall firmly in the latter category, and clearly shunned any extra efforts.

"You think that Kishitani has become a changed man, but do you actually know him well enough to judge?"

"No, I have to admit I don’t know him that well."

"You mentioned that he had been promoted to the first-string team and became smarter, but maybe something has simply caused him to reconsider his lifestyle and start to make an effort? Who knows, maybe he's fallen in love with some girl and wants to show off? Sometimes, people can change for such simple reasons."

What Towako-san said made perfect sense. I could agree with her.

I had no clue what exactly made me suspect him so strongly—which might in fact be the reason I couldn't get it off my mind.

"Let me confirm this once again: *Masquerade* is designed to create a copy of its user that has the same personality and skills?" I asked.

"Exactly."

"Everything's perfectly identical, right?"

"Right. There would be no point in a copy otherwise."

Indeed. It would defeat the point to have a copy if it weren’t identical.

Perhaps I was reading too much into Kishitani's atypical behavior, and the uneasiness I was feeling would prove groundless.

"However," Towako-san suddenly said with a serious mien, "our experiences have a strong influence on our personalities. Should the user ever allow his copy to engage in lots of experiences and grow negligent in syncing their memories, then their personalities will diverge more and more, eventually leaving them as two completely different beings."

"—A copy is anything but a marionette."

My copy came home earlier than I expected.

"What's the matter? Don't tell me you thought it would be okay to goof off?"

I didn't want to admit it, but that was very possible, given that he was my copy.

"I wouldn't do that! Unless you order me to, that is. Ah, did you become anxious because your only order was for me to go to school? Don't worry, I'm not going to split hairs!"

"Yeah, you wouldn't. But then why are you back so early?"

"Because we had two matches in a row, there were no club activities today. That's all."

"Aha. And did anything happen today?"

"We changed desks! We're sitting in the last row now."

"I see. That makes it easier to nap."

"There's no need for you to go to school just to doze off; that's what I'm here for, after all. You can make yourself comfortable at home in bed."

"Word. Anything else happen?"

"I guess there was nothing else noteworthy?"

"Didn't people say anything about the match?"<-- in general trying to make him sound more casual so several of these minor edits are of that nature grrarr-->

"Ah, I see what you're getting at. They did talk about that match—our manager waxed lyrical about my success in front of the rest of the class."

"Hey, I wanna see that."

I had started to get tired of syncing our memories, but I definitely willing to make an exception for something like that.

"Just cut straight to that part."

"Okay!"

My copy’s memories started to enter my mind.

He was surrounded by girls. They heaped praise on me as our team manager was telling them about our achievements.

The manager said that she would make me a boxed lunch for the next match, making the other girls squeal and tease her. While she claimed that she didn't have any romantic intentions, she didn't seem all that averse to dating me, either.

I felt great. Finally, I was starting to get acknowledged. Finally, I was starting to get attention. Right: my high school life was always supposed to be like that.

"Well, that's pretty much it. After that, we just switched seats and had classes like normal."

At that moment my copy removed his forehead from mine, and I was pulled back to reality.

The praise I had received from the girls was still sparkling in my ears. That was the first time I'd ever had such a great experience, yet I was somehow dissatisfied. I couldn't help but feel that I had wasted an opportunity. I should have gone to school today, and enjoyed standing in the spotlight first-hand.

Strange as it was to envy myself, I was still a little jealous of my copy.

"Hey, I'll go to school tomorrow."

"Mm? As you wish."

I was feeling kind of annoyed. "If there's any homework or other stuff like that, do it all," I ordered my copy.

However, on the next day, practically no one gave a shit about the match anymore. Our manager did quickly pat me on the back, and told me to practice hard for the next match.

I also tried to bring up my victory, but no one really responded. Apparently, it was all water under the bridge now. I regretted coming to school in place of my copy.

That being said, it was too late to switch now.

Besides, it made for a nice change to go to school once in a while. I toyed with the thought of doing so from time to time going forward, instead of relying completely on sharing memories.

"Hey, Kishitani, here's the ball!"

Whoops! Gotta get my act together. It's soccer time now.

That day was the first time I had shown up—in person and not as my copy—at our club in a long time. Before, I would have only been a ball boy, but this time I was allowed to take part in a practice match with a selected group of participants.

I received a pass from a senior, and dribbled toward the goal .

I took a quick peek at the side of the field. Our manager was watching me.

Okay, time to take a shot at the goal!

The match on Saturday had been a debacle because of a lack of exercise and because my initial first-string game made me nervous, but this time I was just playing in a practice match. No problem.

I evaded the enemy defense, wound up for a kick, and... lost the ball before I could shoot.

"Fuck!"

"Don't sweat it! I'll pass it to you a few more times!" a senior said to me as he patted my back.

"Here!"

I waved my arm, urging a teammate of mine to give me a pass. I promptly received it, but this time around an opposing player on defense stole the ball before it even reached me.

"Please shoot the ball better next time!"

"Whoa, whoa! You have to move more, dude! If you take root like that, you'll just be an easy target!" said the defense player who had taken the ball from me with an amazed look on his face. "Your problem is that your playing style is inconsistent."

"Y-You think so?"

I never bothered to think about it, but he's probably right - my play is sometimes inconsistent. Well, I guess that's just the nature of gifted people.

"Give it your best! We need good newcomers in our team, so we're counting on you!"

"Got it."

"Just play like you normally do."

Like always, huh. He's right. I shouldn't try to show off—it's all about playing like normal.

"Here!"

This time I got moving and succeeded in receiving the ball. There was still some distance between me and the goal, but I didn't care; I was going to rush all the way there.

"Kishitani, I'm open!" a teammate yelled as he raised his arm. But the goal was already within reach. I just had to get by the last line of defense...

However, my attempt to dribble past them failed; the opposing senior easily stole the ball from me.

"Dang it!"

"Kishitani! It's not over yet!"

A teammate recaptured the ball and passed in to me once more.

All right then, I'll show you what a real shot looks like!

I kicked the ball with all my might. But because my posture was kinda awkward, I lost my balance, went down ass over teakettle, and sent the ball flying way over the goal.

My teammates gathered around me.

"Jeez, don't overdo it, Kishitani."

"Besides, I was open earlier. You should have passed to me instead of trying to go all the way on your own!"

"Like I said: play like you normally do. You're trying too hard."

While I was apologizing to them, I got confused.

I'm trying too hard, you say? Pass more often, you say?

Even though I was pretty damn sure that I was playing like normal, they cocked their heads in perplexity. They may have told me to play like normal, but I was unable to form a clear image of how I used to play.

"I’m sorry - I though I was playing like normal..."

"Not at all! Today, you've been playing like you used to - totally hogging the ball!"

Used to? When was that?

"Yeah, or like how you played on Saturday. That was *really* bad."

"Absolutely, that was terribad. There's gotta be a limit to how nervous you can get. Your stamina went down the drain, too. Anyway, the thing is, just keep up doing what you've been doing lately."

"Exactly. How you've been playing normally during practice recently."

How I've been playing lately? Lately? But I haven't shown up for our practice lately. No, that's wrong; that's not true. I've become a first-string player because of my achievements in our practice matches, and I even scored a goal in a real game, didn't I?

Yeah. I gotta have more confidence in myself. I can do it.

"Kishitani, here you go!"

I received another pass. This time I lost the ball because I was absent-minded and didn't capture the ball properly.

"Hey, receiving a pass like that would normally have been a breeze for you!"

What damned "normal" are you talking about?

"Shoot, Kishitani!"

Again, someone sent me a pass. This time the ball hit my foot at a bad angle and just rolled away.

"Hey, slamming that ball into the net would have been a breeze for you normally!"

What damned "normal" are you talking about?

"Kishitani, like normal!" "Kishitani, just play the way you've been playing recently!" "Kishitani, you're supposed to be better than that!" "Kishitani, where did all your recent skills go?" "Kishitani..." "Kishitani..."

You've lost me. How have I been playing recently? How have I played normally?

I can't remember. Then how about really recently? When did I play best recently? On Sunday. How did I play in the match on Sunday? Think! Right... I scored a goal. I also made some assists. I was great. And everyone praised me!

Huh...? But was that me?

Yeah, it was.

But somehow it wasn't.

That can't be. If it wasn't me, who was it then?

Who on earth—

"Ah..."

"What's wrong, Kishitani?" our coach said as he patted me on the back. "—You haven’t been yourself."

My heart skipped a beat.

"C-Coach, when have I been like myself then?"

"Mm? Now that's a strange question, but I guess…lately?"

"But what do you actually mean by 'lately'?!"

"Hey, what's wrong? Don't get too worked up. Just calm down and try to remember…for example, how you felt when you played on Sunday."

I felt dizzy. My head started spinning. My legs started wobbling. Why was the ground so shaky?

"I feel like vomiting..."

"Kishitani! Kishitani! Kishitani...Kishi...Ki...!..."

I could only listen as their voices faded into the distant background.

"Welcome back. You're quite late today, aren't you?" said my copy. He'd been patiently waiting for me at home.

I was more than an hour late because I had rested at the infirmary-though it didn't help any.

"How was it? Weren't you the star today? Share your memories with me!" my copy urged as he approached me, trying to touch his forehead to mine. I shook him off. "What's wrong?"

"Enough."

"Huh?"

"It's over and done with. I won't let you go to school anymore, and I won't let you play soccer anymore. No, I won't *use* you at all anymore."

I grabbed my copy's face and tried to remove his mask.

However, he only smiled on the other side of my palm.

"Are you sure?"

A shiver ran down my spine and froze my hand.

"What do you mean...?"

"Just what I said! Are you sure that you want to stop using me?"

"Of course. I don't need something like you."

"So you're okay with abandoning your position as a first-string player?"

"Abandon? I'll still be a first-string player even after you're gone. Besides, anything you can do, I can do that just as well. After all, we're identical, aren't we?"

"Do you really think so?"

"What?"

"I wonder, how much time will it take for you to become as good as I am? After idling away your time and making me do all your work?"

"I..."

"When you were lazing about at home, I was practicing hard , and polishing my skills by playing with and against our

seniors. While we can share our memories, we cannot share our skills and conditioning. Don’t you realize that we're not the same anymore?"

Last Saturday crossed my mind. I could barely move because I hadn’t exercised in ages. My body had gotten really rusty. The same thing happened today: everything sucked. How long would it take me to regain my old conditioning, and then improve enough to live up to the "normal" that everyone had been talking about?

Would I have to listen to that crap constantly the whole time ?

That I should play like normal.

That I'm not myself, comparing me to something that's not me.

"And I'm not just talking about soccer! I have studied hard for school and gotten good grades. Sharing memories might update you on the material I've learned thus far, but will you really be able to follow suit? If your grades suddenly go down the drain, people will suspect that you were cheated before, won't they?"

My copy might be right.

How would I be treated when I became unable to do things that used to be normal for me?

"I managed to become really accomplished in school and at soccer, and I even had to overcome your handicaps! It was really hard! But you're right, in theory we're identical, so you might be able to do it if you tried hard enough. But you will fail unless you give it absolutely everything, skipping manga and games entirely and cutting down on sleep. Will you be able to handle that?"

Will I be able to handle that? Me?

"Just use me! Like you've gotten used to. For your convenience. Or why don't you just leave everything to me? I'll deal with school for you! It doesn't matter which one of us goes, as long as we keep our memories in sync."

I guess so? If we have the same face, the same appearance, and the same skills, maybe it doesn't matter who of us goes.

"Don't get me wrong: I'm saying this for your sake! It's reckless to try to do alone what we could only accomplish together! I'll be in charge of school and soccer as always, while you can keep doing the fun things like reading manga and playing games. We are one. That's our 'normal'."

It's like my copy said. That's our 'normal.' That's the 'normal ' they were talking about.

"Everything's in order!"

Right. Everything's in order.

"Just leave all the shit to me!"

As always, Kishitani was surrounded by others.

He was apparently explaining our homework assignment to them. As far as I knew, his grades had been in the lowest quantiles of our school. After all, he had kept me company in taking a retest. Besides, he used to avoid any extra labor like the plague. Despite that, he had improved vastly in both school and sports, and was now even teaching others.

The new and improved Kishitani was no flash in the pan, and his reputation had improved.

That reputation had also spread beyond our classroom , causing some of his former classmates to pop by and

confirm the rumors with their own eyes. To a man, they departed in astonishment after witnessing his transformed personality.

...Transformed personality, huh?

There was no nastier way to describe him.

As Towako-san had pointed out previously, I wasn't actually that familiar with Kishitani. Still, I couldn't help but smell a rat, and while I told myself that there was no need to bother, I couldn't fully shake off my concerns.

I still considered Kishitani suspicious, but as time passed, I failed to find any evidence to support my suspicions.

However, a painful noise ran through my head one day—

Kishitani stood while covering his face with his hands.

As a result, I couldn't see his face very clearly, but the visible parts that peeked out from the gaps between his fingers were enough to identify him.

He slowly pulled away his hands, peeling his face off like a piece of prosthetic makeup.

A 'mask' lay in his hands.

The perspective moved upward once more.

The face that had appeared under the mask was like that of a puppet... No, I'll be honest: it looked like the face of a corpse, lacking all expression.

I was perplexed when I woke up from my 'Vision'.

Unlike all the other 'Visions' I'd witnessed thus far, this one was rather abstract.

It was unclear if any death had taken place at all.

Considering Towako-san's theory, that scene might simply have implied that Kishitani was about to lose his place in society due to excessive indolence.

But I had a feeling that there was more to it.

Added to the slight concerns I'd had ever since his change in personality, despite Towako-san's denial, an image that suggested that the copy created by ' Masquerade' took over its origin—Kishitani—

At any rate, I was very uneasy after seeing that image of the future.

My alarm bells were ringing.

"Mm?"

"Practicing this early in the morning? Quite the hard worker, aren't you, Kishitani?"

On the following day, I waited for him in the classroom because I knew that he always trained before school. The sports ground this early in the morning had been a really tranquil sight. Kishitani had been running through it silently and all alone.

"You've joined the first string recently, I heard? Looks like you're fired up more than ever now that you're in such a position, huh?"

"I kinda suck, so I'd be back in the second-string in no time if I goof off. I don't want to lose my current position, after striving for it for so long."

"I didn't think I'd ever hear such commendable words from you. When did you become so earnest?"

"My state of mind changed a little!"

"Your state of mind? It seems like your entire personality changed!"

"My personality? Lately, I've been hearing that a lot," Kishitani replied in an unconcerned manner.

However, there had been a small pause. Normally, that would have been no skin off my nose, but under the current circumstances, it bothered me a great deal.

"Looks like you've been doing well recently in school as well?"

"Eh? Yeah."

"When do you even have time to study when you're practicing from early in the morning until late in the evening?"

"Well, I'm studying when I get home."

"No kidding! Didn't you tell us about that video game you were playing? How would you be able to improve your grades and clear a game at the same time? You're working so hard it seems like there were two of you, dude!"

"R-Really?"

"There's a trick to it, isn't there?"

"Not at all! I'm merely playing games and studying from time to time."

"Come on, we're buddies, aren't we? Let me in on your secret!"

Buddies? Really? I get chills myself from saying that.

"Umm," he uttered while letting his gaze wander.

"What's wrong?"

"Err, have we really been on such good terms with each other?"

"...Now that's a funny remark. No one would ever say such a thing out loud, you know?"

"I-I guess so."

"Anyway, we've taken a retest together, haven't we?"

"A-Aah, I see. Right. You had to repeat that retest, though."

"Shut it. So, what's your secret?"

"I have none! You're starting to get on my nerves, you know?"

"Sorry about that! I don't mean to complain to you, I'm just curious."

"But there's no trick!" he said once again. He seemed to suspect something was amiss, and turned toward the exit .

"Ah, one more thing."

"What is it?"

"The owner of the shop I'm working at told me that she's seen you before. What did you buy in such a strange antique shop?"

"!"

He was so easy to see through despite his mask.

I had suspected him, but had found no hard proof thus far.

His reaction, however, overcame my doubts for good.

Kishitani was the owner of 'Masquerade'.

I just didn't know whether the person before me was the real person or the copy, but there was no way to tell. At any rate, it was not the "old Kishitani."

Suddenly, the door rattled open, and Shinjou entered the room.

"Huh? You're here pretty early today guys, aren't you? "

"You too."

"Me? I'm just on day duty today."

Kishitani seized the moment and slipped out of the classroom.

"Hey, wai...," I called out to him, but he completely ignored me.

"Something wrong?"

"Nah...," I said, evading the question Shinjou had posed after he looked at both of us suspiciously.

At that moment.

"Tokiya."

I turned around upon hearing a new voice, and my eyes immediately sprung wide.

"Wha..."

To my surprise, it was Saki.

"Saki? Why are you...?"

"Who's that, Kurusu? Don't remember seeing her around here. Is she in our school?"

"Ah, nope, she's one of my coworkers."

"Hey, you never told me that you work with such a cutie!"

"Tokiya, can you spare me a moment?"

"'Tokiya'? Whoa whoa! You're calling each other by the first name? So you're in *that* kind of relationship?"

"We aren't!"

"Now, now, don't be shy! Hey, you..."

"What?"

Shinjou, who had tried to take an easygoing approach, shrunk back.

"...Uh, err, what's your name?"

"Saki Maino."

"......Uh, err, how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"".....Uh, err, you don't happen to be Tokiya's..."

"".....No, I'm not."

"".....Um... yeah, no, Kurusu...! What have I done to her...?" Shinjou turned to me with teary eyes. Apparently, he had been unable to withstand Saki's lack of expression . Well, I admit that *that's* quite tough to tolerate on one's first encounter with Saki. Of course, she wasn't angry or anything. She was just behaving like normal.

"Are you done?"

"Yes."

After getting the devastated Shinjou's okay, I left the classroom together with Saki. I took her to the roof for the time being, where we could be alone.

"Why are you here? You'll be in trouble if someone finds you!"

"It's fine. No one will notice when I'm wearing a uniform."

...Indeed, she didn't look very different from normal because her clothes were still black, but she *was* wearing the blazer from our school uniform.

"Towako-san had one."

"Why on earth would she have one?"

"Who knows?"

"A new Relic, huh..."

"Don't be silly."

"I know, I know! I just wanted to say it. So, what kind of business do you have?"

"Urgent!"

"Why didn't you just give me a call?"

"It would have been hard to explain over the phone," Saki said and took something out of her pocket. I had no idea how Saki had gotten her hands on it, but it was a group shot of my class. "The person who bought ' Masquerade' isn't in this photo."

"Huh? Wait a sec. What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just what I said. When I showed that photo to Towako-san, she said that she doesn't think the buyer is in it."

"Maybe she's just forgotten how he looks? She never saw him clearly anyway, right?"

"Towako-san also thought that might be the case, so she asked the owner of the sister shop - the answer stayed the same! The buyer's definitely not in this photo."

"Just let me have a look," I said as I snatched the group shot away from Saki. It goes without saying that Kishitani was in there. "That's Kishitani."

"I see."

"Can you have her check once more?"

"I already had her check several times."

...What the hell? So Kishitani doesn't have 'Masquerade'? But then what in the world caused that uneasiness I had felt regarding him, and what about the rumors about his sudden personality change?

Was that uneasiness just me, and his change really just a natural change in personality?

No, that's impossible.

Had it only been my uneasiness or those rumors, I might have been able to dismiss them as a misunderstanding on my part.

But I had seen it.

I had seen a future through my 'Vision.'

A future where Kishitani would take off 'Masquerade'.

A future that showed me that nearly dead face beneath the mask.

"Tokiya... you must be wrong about your suspect."

"!"

I took another look at the photo. I stared holes into it.

I was there. Kishitani was there. The other students were there. It was without a doubt a group shot of our class.

However—

"What's wrong?"

"...There's something I have to confirm."

I was in disbelief, but it was worth a try.

Leaving Saki behind, I headed toward the staff room.

"Hey, did anyone visit you today?" my copy asked right as he entered my room.

I paused my fifth playthrough and looked at him.

I really want a new game already. If only I weren't short on cash.

"Didn't you hear me?"

He grabbed me by the collar.

What a crude fellow. Almost like I used to be. Oh wait, he is me, so that figures.

"*Did Kurusu come here*?"

Kurusu? Who's that? Ah, there was one guy by that name in my class. Sure haven't heard that name in a long time. I wonder if he's doing well. Mm? A long time? Even though I see him every day? Oh, but it makes still sense, I guess—after all it's my copy who sees him. It's certainly been a while since I've seen him personally.

"So, did he?"

"He didn't... I think."

"Don't think, remember, jackass! It looks like he's somehow onto us. He was at school this morning, but then he suddenly disappeared. Apparently, he asked for someone's address in the staff room. Maybe he was planning to come over and check if *I'm* here."

"....."

"Can you give me a proper answer now?"

"I haven't seen anyone. I haven't talked to anyone. I haven't met anyone."

"I see. Very good," my copy said and let out a sigh of relief. "Listen, this is over if he finds out about us! Don't go outside when I'm not here from now on, okay? You mustn't answer the door, either! And don't let anyone see you through the window. Got it?"

Outside? Now that I think of it, when was I last outside? More like, when did I last look at what's going on outside? I thought while gazing absent-mindedly at the window whose curtain had been shut for something like forever.

When did I last talk to someone other than my copy anyway?

...Oh well, I don't care. Not at all.

I get what my copy is talking about.

I mustn't be discovered because my real self is at school during the daytime.

Huh? If my real self is at school, who am I, the guy who's playing games all day at home?

...Oh well, I don't care. Not at all. Can't be bothered.

I suspended my thoughts and turned to the TV screen to finish my fifth playthrough.

I didn't have to care about the outside world.

"Sorry for calling you out," I said as I walked onto the rooftop with Kishitani.

I had caught him in the classroom before his voluntary morning practice. Given that he wasn't surprised in the least and followed me right away, he had apparently been expecting my approach.

"So? What's the matter, Kurusu?"

Kishitani was clearly wary of me.

"I was at your place yesterday."

"Was that why you weren't in class?"

"Yeah. But did no one tell you that I stopped by?"

"Well, the house was empty when you visited."

"No, it wasn't. Your mother was there."

"!"

"What's wrong?"

"A-Aah, my mom was at home? I thought she was at work, you know."

"Anyway, I had her get you."

"Me? I wouldn't be at home during class, would I? Unlike you, I was at school, studying hard."

"Bullshit. You weren't at school yesterday."

"What are you talking about? I was definitely there!"

"No, you weren't."

"Hey, give me a break! You're just spouting bullshit!"

"Even the attendance list says that you were absent!" I said and tossed him the attendance list, which I had borrowed from the staff room beforehand. Kishitani opened it and looked up his name, slightly nonplussed.

"Who are you saying was absent? Use your eyes! It says I was present!" he complained, turning the list back toward me and pointing at his name.

"No, you should use your eyes. That's not your name, is it?" I replied as I retrieved the list from him. "I'm referring to this name! Look!" I said, pointing at a row with only "X's," which represented absences.

"—Keisuke Sagara."

Kishitani—no, Sagara in Kishitani's guise widened his eyes in astonishment.

"Sorry for beating around the bush. I wanted to get you riled up and corner you for a bit because you were so wary of me. Besides, I wanted to make sure you had some free will. Let's be frank from here on out, shall we?"

"Wha-Wha-What are you..."

"Didn't I just say let's be frank? You don't have to act like Kishitani anymore."

I had asked Towako-san one more thing about *Masquerade* the day before.

'Masquerade' creates a copy of the user with the same personality and the same skills when placed on a puppet or a mannequin.

But what if a human were to wear the mask?

I just couldn't understand why Kishitani's personality and skills would start to change.

I tried to satisfy my concerns by coming up with all kinds of explanations, such as a difference in experience due to neglecting memory synchronization, a change of mind, it being purely my imagination or just a misunderstanding.

However, I felt that there was a gap between the copy and the original that could not be explained so easily.

A gap so wide that they had to be considered two different people.

Thus, I posed a question to myself: When placed on a blank puppet with neither mind nor will, the mask might create a copy that assumes the same personality as the user. But if one were to put the mask on a human who already has a personality, would the result really be identical to the user?

According to Towako-san, we didn't know for sure. She even mentioned the possibility that the personalities of the user and the target—Kishitani and Sagara—might merge into a complicated mixture.

Once I had arrived at that thought, I was set.

I knew that one of my classmates had obtained *Masquerade*.

I knew that he or she wasn't in the group picture of our class.

From there, it became clear to me that the classmate who wasn't in that picture had used *Masquerade* to assume the appearance of Kishitani.

I learned the address of the missing student, Sagara, from our teacher, and went to Sagara's home. I talked to his mother there, and as she told me, Sagara was supposed to be at school.

According to her, he had recently started to go to school again after skipping class for a long time due to bullying. But he told her that he didn't consider himself ready to go to school alone yet. Thus, he elected to stay at a friend's place so that they could go to school together.

Apparently, Sagara had gotten in touch with our teacher directly regarding his absences, and thus his parents were left in the dark.

But there was one thing that didn't quite make sense to me: Why did Sagara become the copy of the person who had bullied him?

"If you're only acting like Kishitani because you can't get that mask off, I'll lend you a hand and help you remove it!"

"...Hehe, hahaha. Hahahaha!" Sagara burst out, unable to hold back his laughter. "I see you aren't surprised by this mysterious phenomenon. It seems like you know even more than I do?"

"...Somewhat."

"But I'd rather you didn't act like you knew everything about me! 'Only because I can't get it off?' No. I wanted to become like this. Don't get in my way!"

"Seems so... huh."

In the scenario I had imagined, Kishitani stole *Masquerade* from Sagara, or something along those lines, and made him a scapegoat. But in our talk, it seemed like Sagara willingly played his role as Kishitani. As a matter of fact, he just admitted it.

"What do you want to achieve by replacing Kishitani?"

"...At first, I planned on making a copy of him and taking revenge on it. To pay him back in his own coin. But because that didn't seem all that enjoyable, I decided to act like him myself and commit some crimes."

"And then make it his fault? That's just tawdry."

"Indeed, I also thought that was tawdry. I was disenchanted with myself for being unable to come up with a better form of revenge. I was disgusted with myself."

"Then why..."

"Which is why I decided to just become someone else."

"!"

"I decided to put on this mask and live as someone else ! And I chose Kishitani for that. I went to him and told him that I wanted to become like him; that I would deal with all his burdens, like school.

It was smooth sailing after that, in part because I know what kind of personality he has and his tastes, because I had to cater to him when I was bullied. Of course he didn't believe me in the beginning, but when I took on this appearance after having him put that mask on me, he had to give up all his doubts. We started by taking turns. Once he learned that nobody could tell which one of us was at school, my days at school gradually started to increase. By now, he's the one who's at home all day.

He wasn't the only one who profited, though. I was also happy. I don't have to adjust myself to others anymore, after all. It's the first time in my life that I enjoyed going to school! I get good grades, I play in the first string, and I am at the center of attention. I have been reborn. My school life has finally begun for real."

"It hasn't started. Nothing has started at all. Your life has stopped!"

"You're talking about Keisuke Sagara's life, I suspect? I don't mind if it remains stopped. No, it might just as well end. I will live on as Kishitani. But not as the old one—as a new Kishitani."

"You aren't Kishitani."

"Yes, now I am! And will be. Who cares? Nobody can tell the difference. Nobody is bothered. I'm quite popular as well, as things stand now. Everyone loves the new Kishitani much more than the old one!"

"But it's just wrong."

"What is?"

"Everything."

"So you think it was right that he bullied me until I was afraid of going to school and shut myself in at home ?! Do you even know how miserable I felt back then?! Don't you dare get in my way when you haven't given a shit about me ever before!"

I recalled the future I had seen through 'Vision.'

He will vanish. If I don't intervene, the identity of Sagara is going to vanish and die.

"'Relics' bring disaster upon us. Stop using it."

"'Relics' bring bliss upon us. I absolutely won't let go of it."

I won't let it be too late.

Admittedly, I hadn't done anything for Sagara so far. But now I was in a position to help him.

"Sagara..."

"Don't call me by that name. Sagara doesn't exist anymore. That useless guy is dead!"

Sagara raised his fist and came at me.

There's no way an unathletic guy like me could win a fight against a well-conditioned soccer player like him.

"—You'll be for the high jump if you thought that, Sagara!"

Unlike you, I have been through hell and high water!

A crisis that doesn't even trigger my 'Vision' is nothing!

I countered with a powerful punch straight into the mask that was covering his face.

Sagara was sent flying and rolled on the floor.

"You damn...," he said while trying to stand up, and then suddenly grabbed at his face.

Masquerade had come off a bit due to the impact of the blow. His real face became visible. He hurriedly tried pushing the mask into place, but once removed, the mask wouldn't take on "Kishitani's" appearance anymore.

Putting it on again would only result in his own face.

Sagara seemed to be aware of that fact as well: The mask fell out of his limp hands and bounced against the ground. I picked it up and looked at him.

His unmasked face was pale and blank like that of a corpse.

But it was undoubtedly the face of a real person—of Keisuke Sagara himself.

After Sagara told me that the mask had been broken, my double life came to an end.

I awoke from that dream.

Why would I shut myself in at home?

Why would I entrust Sagara with everything?

Being so timid wasn't like me at all. No, I hadn’t been timid—I had merely felt like taking some time off. I had taken a long break from school. That's all.

I was returning to school the following day.

I was sure there would be some guys telling me to act like I used to, or something like that.

But just let them talk—I'll show them what I’ve got.

I didn't mind if it took awhile.

What my copy had managed to do, I could do just as well.

I smiled as I thought back to my memories from when I played in the first string, got good grades and was surrounded by all my fans.

I was gazing down at the grounds from the rooftop.

A practice soccer match was taking place before my eyes.

A second-year forward who had replaced another player caught a difficult pass and drew level by beautifully slamming a ball into the net.

His teammates gathered around him and gave him a loud cheer.

"Well done Sagara!" someone yelled in a voice loud enough to be heard even from the school rooftop.

"What kind of spell have you cast on him?" Saki asked as she stood beside me—in a school uniform of course. Apparently, she had taken a liking to visiting me at school. "Why the heck are you here, anyway?"

"I just wanted to have a taste of that feeling of being in high school. Does it bother you?"

"Nah, I don't mind. Well, I guess it makes for a good change of pace once in a while?"

I didn't dislike the prospect of being at school with her.

"So?"

"What?"

"Didn't you think that it might be over for him? You were worried that he might decide to remain a shut-in, weren't you?"

"Was I?"

"You were!"

But contrary to my worries, Sagara was actively taking part in the game. He was acting like a different man. No, that wasn’t quite right - like a newborn man.

Right after losing *Masquerade*, Sagara's face had looked like that of a man watching the end of the world. Well, perhaps the world inside him had actually come to an end.

I had to tell him something.

I said that *Masquerade* might be able to create a perfect copy from a puppet, but it was only able to copy the body when placed on a person’s face.

He didn't understand at first, but when he did, he desperately asked me, "So it wasn't Kishitani's personality and skills that let me excel at soccer, get good grades, and become so popular?"

I nodded, telling him that he could count all the things he had done in Kishitani's stead as his own achievements , and that he could pull off just as much on his own if he chose.

"Is that true?" Saki asked.

"Who knows?"

"What...?"

"But don't you agree?"

Down below, Sagara scored another goal.

While he had avoided school for a long time, he *was* willing to learn and had thus still studied and practiced sports on his own during that time. All that had been left was getting past his fears. Of course, not everything went smoothly. He was still somewhat out of place in our class . He wasn't playing on the first string either, and was only given the chance to take part in soccer matches as a substitute.

Nevertheless, he was definitely satisfied with his progress. For now, the people who knew him were saying that he was acting like a different person, but as I looked at how his teammates clustered around him to offer their praise, I was convinced that a day would come when his successes would be considered in character.

"Many a true word is oft spoken in jest, right? Anyway , give it back to me," Saki ordered.

"'It'?"

"The picture."

"Aah," I responded and produced the picture. "By the way, why do you have a picture of my class, anyway?"

"You once asked me to make some copies of it for you, remember? I accidentally made one too many."

"Why didn't you just throw it away?"

"I don't like throwing away photos."

"But there's no reason for you to keep it, is there?"

"Just give it back to me," she said and snatched the photo away from me in order to stuff it into her pocket. In her rush, she accidentally creased one of the corners, causing her to frown briefly. Apparently, she disliked creases in photos as much as throwing them away?

"If you're so keen on my photos, just ask and I'll give you some!" I joked, hoping to cheer her up.

Saki paused for a moment. "I like thi... I don't need any ," she finally responded with her usual lack of expression and looked away.

Tch. Such a prudish girl.

Suddenly, I heard a whistle from below.

The match ended and the team manager handed Sagara a towel. She was the girl who, until recently, had flirted regularly with Kishitani.

"Now that's a fast-moving girl."

"You're mistaken. She merely perceived to his inner value!"

"That's a different way of looking at things, I guess."

"That's the only way to look at things."

As for Kishitani, no longer a recipient of that manager's attention—

"Coach, please let me play! You know what I can do!"

Kishitani had managed to reintegrate himself as well and was back at school. That being said, one day, out of the blue, he started to frequently come in late, his grades went down the drain and he lost his position on the first-string team.

"Please! I can do it if I try!"

"If I try", huh? That's quite a convenient motto, but it cuts both ways.

One person had chosen to believe in it wholeheartedly and never ceased in his efforts, while the other had used it as an excuse to goof off.

"Why don't you try to study harder as well, Tokiya? Maybe you can do it if you try."

Because Saki's sardonic remark had really struck home , I put on a fake "mask" of composure and replied:

"I wouldn't be able to recover if I tried and failed, so I never try."

"Pathetic."

1. ↑ Perman (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perman)
2. ↑ Look it up.

Chapter 3 - Eyes of Death

The eyes are as eloquent as the tongue.

The proverb is used when the eyes reveal everything even when it's not put into words.

That said, it's naturally not so easy to read someone's mind just by looking into their eyes.

In by far the most cases, words are necessary to convey things, and we can't really read someone's thoughts off their eyes.

In the first place, not all people show their feelings in their eyes. Some of them don't even show them on their face.

My workmate is like that. She only alters her mien so slightly that it's impossible to tell whether she's happy or angry, and when someone gets to see her deadpan for the first time, he almost certainly shrinks back. But even though she's unable to even just put on a friendly smile, she feels a vocation to attend to customers. I have not the slightest idea what's going on in her head.

Although I feel that I'm slowly starting to get the knack of understanding her.

Or is that just me?

Not only your brain remembers things.

Your ears remember sounds,

your nose remembers smells,

your hands remember touches,

and your eyes remember scenes.

Have you ever felt familiar with something on hearing, smelling, touching or seeing it even before your mind reacted?

One theory says that that's because your subconscious mind has memorized it, but I feel otherwise.

I believe that our ears, our noses, our hands and our eyes can also remember things.

Among those, I'm especially intrigued by the memories of the eyes.

If you see what a person has seen in his life, you know his life.

Others' lives are very interesting; but once you *hear* about them, they quickly become boring.

That is because of subjectivism—bragging, exaggeration and lies.

But it's the life itself that's interesting, without any bragging, exaggeration or lies.

Therefore, I watch for myself.

I watch others' lives through their eyes.

As I did on any other day, I took a look at the empty seats in the first wagon.

There tended to be comparatively many empty seats in the first wagon of this train.

I wasn't exhausted; I was going to be sitting for hours later at work anyway. That notwithstanding, it was a daily exercise for me to sit in this wagon.

But before taking a seat somewhere, I looked around at the people on the other side.

There was a sleeping person, a reading person, a person applying make-up, a person playing a game, and many others. But among them, there was a girl who was looking out of the window. She was probably still in high school.

I sat down opposite of that absent-minded high school girl and started observing her.

She was wearing the uniform of a private school that was three stations from here. If my memory doesn't fail me, it was a quite famous all-girls school. The school badge on her collar was colored green, so she was a third-year student. Judging from the scratch she had in her kneecap, she either belonged to a club that did sports, or she had made that injury during PE.

After finishing that evaluation, I corrected the position of my glasses and looked at her—or more precisely, at her eyes. She noticed me and returned my gaze. I sharpened my eyes, projecting my consciousness.

Her eyes lost their focus for a moment.

Connected, I smirked in mind.

Looking at others means connecting to others to me. Once connected, I would go deeper. I would get the feeling of being drawn into their eyes when gazing at them. But in fact, it's the opposite: I throw myself into there of my own accord. Into those eyes, and into whatever lies beyond them.

I could see; I could see something—the memory of her eyes.

The things she had seen showed in my eyes, as though as her eyes had become mine.

The first picture her eyes had memorized appeared.

It was an alarm clock. Its clock hand was indicating 09:00 am. The field of vision extended for a moment, and then zoomed in on the clock. It was set to ring at 07:00 am.

I see. She's indeed a bit late for a high school student. Looks like she overslept.

Most likely, she had taken a second look at the alarm clock in surprise. Unable to accept the reality, she did so for nearly a whole thirty seconds, even though she would have been better off hurrying up already.

Oh, that wouldn't be of any use anyway, I guess?

When she went to the kitchen and ignored the breakfast prepared for her, her mother wasn't at home anymore. After that, I only saw how she prepared for school in a hurry. At first , anyway. To my mild amusement, she grew slower and slower as time went by, apparently feeling that it was of no avail.

I wanted to peek a bit deeper, but the girl stood up because the train had arrived at her station. Our connection broke off immediately. If the connection was as weak as that, I couldn't see any more than that.

Well, it was a good pastime before work, I comforted myself .

That's not what I really wanted to see. I was convinced that there must be more interesting things hidden behind others' eyes.

I let my disappointment out as a sigh and got off the train.

Would I come across an interesting sight today?

Suddenly, I heard the emergency break of a train.

I quickly turned to the origin of the noise. I was positive that I had heard something get squashed. A few seconds later, a scream echoed through the station.

There was a wave of people that assembled at a certain point of the opposite platform, and one that went away from there.

I rushed to that point.

"Somebody's fallen on the rails!"

"Somebody got run over! Hey, call the station staff!"

Confusion and horror could be heard from everywhere. Upon arriving, the station employees started to disperse the crowd with aggressive-sounding roars.

I dived into the crowd.

It was an express train that was never scheduled to stop at this station, thus only the last wagon was still more or less by the platform as the train had come to a halt. Something sticky could be found on the rails the train had passed.

"Don't push! Step back!"

The moment I heard an employee yell so, I felt my body leaning forward.

"Huh?"

Pushed by a wave of onlookers, a few people and I fell together from the platform. The pain of the impact ran through

my body. Because I had fell on another person, however, there was no serious injury.

The clamor welled up again, and the station employees pushed the onlookers away from the rails. "Are you all right?" someone yelled from above, upon which some people stood up and others stayed on the ground.

I shook my head slightly. Not to the level of a cerebral concussion, but my head was aching a little.

I pressed my hand lightly against my forehead, but the moment I did so, I noticed a sticky touch on my face.

I automatically looked at my hands.

They were blood-red. *Did I injure my forehead?* I calmly tried to explain it to myself, but I immediately realized the truth.

There was not only blood around me, but also all kinds of repulsive things somewhere between liquids and solids that I had never seen before in my life.

Exactly. The victim had been run over about where I was sitting.

I shrunk back in terror and put my hand behind me.

However, that hand touched something.

"!"

My brain instinctively tried to picture what it was.

I was already familiar with that sticky touch. I imagined the thing twining around my fingers as black and longish. There were a few possibilities I could think of to explain the substance that was entering the gaps between my fingernails, but I was unable to determine it exactly.

I turned my head around and cautiously looked at my hand.

Its form was far from what I was used to see. It looked so grotesque that I would classify it as ugly anytime if asked to decide between nice and ugly.

My hand was touching something that would usually be called a "head."

That head was lacking an important part that made it look most awkward to me. It was *not* the parts below the neck.

There were no eyes.

"Are you all right?" a station employee yelled from above. I removed my gaze from the head and nodded. "We're bringing a ladder right now, please hold on for a second!"

The employee ordered his colleagues to bring a ladder and started to get in contact with every person that had fallen onto the rails. Fortunately, nobody seemed to be seriously injured.

I could see a bunch of men rushing toward us with a ladder from afar.

I looked again at my hand.

Not because curiosity had gotten the better of fear; I just wanted to take a proper look to make sure what had happened to the eyes.

A thread of sorts was sticking out from the eye sockets. The nerves? Or a thread of sticky blood, perhaps?

But there was nothing ahead of them. What should have been there was...

—in sight.

The eyeballs were lying right behind the head.

"Are you all right? Can you stand up?" asked a station employee as he climbed the ladder down. He was almost here!

I became nervous.

Why would I become nervous?

I only had to wait for help and climb back onto the platform. There was nothing to worry about. Despite that, I didn't want the employee to come yet.

I hadn't come to decision yet.

I was in need of more time.

But he was almost here. Now that he wasn't looking was my only chance.

Once he was here, there would be no chance anymore.

But common sense and my conscience slowed made me waver.

Only a few steps until he would get off the ladder and come to me.

I'm not going to get a chance like this a second time; I will regret it for the rest of my life if I let this opportunity slip now.

Nobody had noticed my intent.

Nobody was taking heed of me.

And certainly nobody would care if *that* went missing.

I reached out my hand and picked *it* up.

And then I stuffed the eyeball into my pocket—

"Mm...," I muttered as I, Tokiya Kurusu, looked around while referring to the piece of paper in my hands.

I had originally been tending the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, but then I received a call from the owner Towako-san and Saki, a co-worker of mine, and was asked to bring them something.

The place they sent me to was located in a certain theme park.

With the entrance fee being a whole 5,000 yen, I had naturally never been in that park before, but I managed to get in this time as a staff member.

Inside, there were several attractions as they could be found in an amusement park, and families as well as groups of students who were enjoying their Friday evening to the fullest.

Leaving that noise behind me, I headed to the place written on my memo.

Before long, a building with a somewhat creepy air about it came in sight. I went to the door, whose mysteriously designed inscription read "The Mansion of Divination," and entered.

The illumination inside was deliberately kept dimmed, causing me to lose my orientation for a moment. Once my eyes got accustomed to the dark, I noticed that there were different rooms in here.

In front of each door, there was a sign that outlined the type of divination that was conducted in the respective room. Apart from orthodox divinations like the "Crystal Ball" or "Cartomancy," there were also curious ones like " Cobra & Mongoose" and "Cell Phone Divination." Among those, there was also a strange sign that said " Relic Divination."

"Welcome!"

I entered the room and was welcomed by a Saki who wore a black robe with a black hood. She was holding a broom. Unable to recognize me under that hood, she continued treating me like a customer.

"This is the Relic Mansion. We will read your fortune and..."

"Hoohohoho! Fear not, lost soul! Yours truly, a mighty witch of old, shall resolve all your... Oh, it's just you, Tokiya?"

Towako-san abruptly stopped her entrance performance upon noticing it was me. She was dressed quite revealingly and a bit like a bondage mistress. Had she been holding a whip on top of that, she would have certainly passed as one. Uncommonly for her, her hair was tied up.

Saki, too, finally noticed that it was me and took off her hood. She was wearing a cat-ears hair band on her head, and the robe was adorned with a tail where her bottom was.

"What's with that outfit?"

"I'm a black cat!"

"...and you're really okay with that?"

"Yes."

"Surprising."

"Why? It's black."

"...I see. Yeah, that's great."

Saki had the incomprehensible character trait of being very particular about the color black and not caring about anything else as long as it was black. Most likely, there was nothing to comprehend there in the first place.

"I guess you two are supposed to depict a witch and her familiar, a black cat in the form of a human?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?" Saki said, pulling off the awkward—and in her case absolutely normal—feat of showing surprise with a perfect deadpan look.

"Huh? You're not?"

"Why would you think of anything else than a Beckoning Cat[1] when talking about cats and commerce? This perfect plan not only improves customer service generally, it even serves to attract customers! ...How careless of me. If I always dressed like this, Tsukumodo might flourish as well."

"Hardly!"

To begin with, you don't seem to have any customers here, either!

"So? I can have a mighty witch resolve all my troubles here?"

"Hey, it's all about building some atmosphere, some atmosphere! But more importantly, did you bring them?" Towako-san asked.

"Yes."

I had brought a great number of Relics with me. Needless to say, fakes that were in our shelves.

"Right, fantastic! There wasn't enough atmosphere here yet, you know."

As she had said, there were a few small Relics like a pocket watch and a silver plate on the desk, but apart from that, there was only some indirect lighting, which left a somewhat blank impression.

"And how's business going here?" I asked, causing Towako-san to contort her face. Well, I could have

guessed as much, since she had asked me to bring something to improve the atmosphere.

Okay then. The reason those two had ditched the Tsukumodo Antique Shop and were working at a place like this has nothing to do with them trying to set against the red figures by means of a part-time employment—though that's not entirely wrong, either. A staff member of this theme park was in search of a substitute for a bedridden fortuneteller happened to come across the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, took a liking to the mood of the shop and asked us to have a go at it.

Attracted by the pay, the two agreed to work there for a week. That pay was, however, not based on hours or a fixed sum, but on pieces. Therefore, when she learned that part of her earnings here would go straight into her pocket, Towako-san immediately recharged her batteries. Money talks.

She was even sly enough to put "Tsukumodo Antique Shop" on the visiting cards she distributed here.

"By the way, how's the shop doing? Do you somehow get along alone?"

"That's a good one."

If it was such a flourishing shop, one wouldn't find all three employees leisurely talking here.

"I'll reduce your wages if you sell less than 10,000 yen a day, got me?"

"We haven't ever sold that much!"

"Shut up. I don't want the extra gain to be higher than the main gain."

"You don't sell much here, anyway, do you?"

"Hmph! Just you wait for a week. And you don't get anything from the extra cash!"

"Right, right. I'm not expecting any! Anyway, I'm returning to the busy shop."

The moment I left the room, someone else entered.

"This is the Relic Mansion. We will read your fortune and..."

"Hoohohoho! Fear not, lost soul! Yours truly, a mighty witch of old, shall resolve all your..."

I left the Divination Mansion as I heard from the room behind me a performance and footsteps quickly leaving again.

I informed my employer about the events and took the day off, and hurried straight home, ignoring the suggestion of a station staff member to go to the hospital for a brief check. After arriving there, I carefully took a handkerchief out of my bag.

The weird bulge in the cloth made it clear that there was something inside.

That said, there was most likely no one who was able to guess what that was.

I gently opened the handkerchief as if I was dealing with some fragile freight.

A eyeball appeared.

I took off my glasses and put them on again into the right position.

The eyeball was staring straight at me from below.

It was a very peculiar sensation to meet someone's eye directly.

A normal person would certainly not have thought of it as " peculiar," but as "repulsive."

But while I did feel fondness, I did not feel the tiniest bit of disgust or fear.

I gulped down and fixed on the eyeball. The eyeball silently returned a look.

It remains unclear if a severed eye possesses something like a "gaze," but our gazes intertwined.

I felt how my consciousness was sucked into the eyeball. Connection established. Success.

I could apparently also peek into a bare eyeball.

What will I see? What will it show to me?

I saw something. I saw something that I hadn't seen for myself. It was the eye's memory.

I saw tracks—as they were usually seen when standing on the platform. He was apparently waiting for the train. The field of vision moved and revealed an approaching train. The gaze

focused on the word *express* for a moment and was dropped again.

Suddenly, the picture moved.

The field of vision made a sudden turn and showed a woman who was standing behind. That woman started to tilt over bit by bit. No, the eyes were tilting over—or more exact, the eyes' owner.

The field of vision made another sudden turn.

A giant metal monster was approaching at overwhelming speed.

Everything turned black at once.

"...!"

I came around.

I noticed that I was breathing wildly. I noticed that my back and my hands were drenched in sweat.

However, there was nothing disagreeable about it at all.

It was not cold sweat my back and my hands were drenched in.

It was not fear that made my breath go wild.

I touched my cheek with the back of my hand. It was hot. I didn't need to look into a mirror to realize that my face was flushed. And there was one more thing that I realized by touching my cheek.

My cheeks were pushed up.

I looked at the eyeball.

I saw a reflection of my own face on it.

The face was smiling.

I was laughing.

I was excited.

The sight of the immediate death had enraptured me.

And then I finally noticed:

Aah, I've finally found what I've been yearning to see for all this time.

I didn't sleep a wink that night.

Still excited, every attempt to sleep failed with me sitting in front of the eyeball before I knew it. As I repeated this procedure, the sky dawned.

Although the eyeball always showed me the same scene, I didn't get enough of it regardless of how many times I viewed it.

Nonetheless, I had to go to work once the morning had come. Of course, I made sure to put the eyeball into the freezer before leaving. I had no idea what would happen in case of decay, but that was pretty much the only conservation measure I could take for the time being. *Maybe I should buy some formalin.*

I reluctantly left the house, the eyeball.

As usual, I sat down on a seat in the first wagon.

As usual, I thought about peeking into the eyes of the person on the opposite.

However, I already found myself unable to see a point in that daily routine of mine.

I was not interested anymore in seeing a rushed latecomer, or an early-morning marital argument, or a drinking get-together that had taken place the other day.

I wanted to see it. I wanted to go straight back home and see that last scene that had burnt itself into the eyeball.

A woman sat down opposite me. That woman was absent-mindedly gazing into the distance. Normally, she would have been just what I was waiting for, but I wasn't interested anymore.

But something bothered me; I had a feeling that I'd seen her before somewhere. Due to the nature of my job, I had a whole lot of onetime encounters. I suspected that she was one of them as well, but my gut feeling told me otherwise.

I had a feeling that I'd seen her many times.

But I couldn't remember where.

Was it just my imagination playing tricks on me?

No, that feeling was too strong to be dismissed so easily.

I adjusted my glasses and peered into her eyes. I was hoping to find out who she was by connecting to her through her eyes.

She didn't notice my gaze, and we connected in a matter of seconds. My field of vision overlapped hers.

Through her eyes, I saw someone's back. A man's. From how near it was, they must have been pressed against each other. The scene took place outside. The place was crammed,

but the people were waiting for something in a queue. *Where is this...? Ah, that's a platform. At a station.*

...Huh?

All of a sudden, the back in front of her eyes tilted forward. Because of a push.

The man turned around.

His eyes met mine—no, hers—widely opened in blank astonishment.

"_____!"

I started up on the spot, attracting the curious gazes of my surroundings.

"Ah..."

While withstanding their looks, I seated myself again as though nothing had happened. They probably thought that I'd nodded off or that I'd just noticed that I'd missed my destination.

Only the woman in front of me still seemed to be miles away.

I also started to gaze at her in an absent-minded manner. I had realized why I had the impression that I'd met her many

times before. I hadn't actually met her. But I had seen her. Countless times.

That moment, the train arrived at a station and stopped.

The woman stood up and got off the train. I followed suit, as this was my arrival station.

There was a sign at the platform, seeking witness reports of the accident that had occurred the day before. There had been speculations in the news that it wasn't an accident, but an incident.

The woman from before walked up to the sign, stood still for a moment, and then headed to the other side of the platform .

To the place where the man had fallen from the day before.

She was looking down at the tracks.

"Excuse me...," I tried addressing her. She whipped around. In contrast to the expressionless face she had shown during the train ride, she had grown horribly pale.

"W-What is it?" she asked in a forcedly calm manner.

I had only spoken to her on impulse, so I was pretty much at a loss for words.

"Ah, um, yes..."

Suspicion started to show on her face.

"This is my name," I said as I spontaneously took a business card out of my bag and handed it to her. She took a look at the card and grew even more suspicious. "Because I thought there might be something on your mind."

"What's up with you? Out of the blue."

Apparently, suspicion had changed into anger. That was no skin off my nose, though. And most of all, I had a joker on hand.

"You lost something important yesterday, didn't you?"

"!"

She was visibly baffled.

"You lost an important person or an important thing in your heart at once, didn't you?"

She was trembling hard.

"Rest assured: I do not plan on doing you any harm, nor do I know anything. I only sense a tremendous aura of loss from you."

"....."

"I do not know what you have lost or what your are worried about, but I would love to assist you in searching for a path to move on," I said as I gently took her hand and pressed my card into it. "You can find me there anytime you'd like."

With these words I left her.

She was still standing there, taken aback and unsure what to do with the card I had given her.

If possible, I wanted to sneak a peek into her eyes. I was curious what she had done after the incident, where she had gone and—most of all—what she had seen.

Needless to say, there was no assurance that she would come and meet me.

But for some reason I was convinced.

She will see me.

"Good morning." Upon arriving at my job location, I was greeted by a staff member. "I heard you got into some trouble yesterday?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for suddenly taking a whole day off."

"No problem at all. But that aside, are you all right already?"

"Yes. I'm eager to resume work today."

After that brief report, I changed clothes in the changing room and went to my workplace.

"Excuse me...," someone said toward my back.

I turned around. Behind me was the woman I had just met at the station.

"Please, follow me."

I opened the door and beckoned her in.

"Welcome to Reika Kagami's Crystal Ball Divination!"

That was my business and my name.

After seeing the woman off, I went for a short break.

It had been child's play to learn about her. When I was here, I could look into the other party's eyes without any restraint. Therefore, I'd only had to read from them.

After pushing the man down onto the tracks and taking to her heels, she idled away her time by walking around aimlessly , entering a restaurant, just to continue her aimless walk shortly after.

She also went to the police office once, but she quickly turned on her heel and returned to her apartment, in which she lived alone.

Once she arrived there, the woman opened an album and looked through it. The man she had pushed down was in a good deal of the photos. Most likely, they had been in a relationship.

After gazing at them for a while, she started getting rid of them by setting them on fire. There weren't that many. Maybe she had originally planned on filling the entire album with pictures of him and her, but in reality, there were barely a few pages.

After she had burned the pictures, she went about deleting e-mails. The messages started a year ago with sweet nothings, but ended with parting words.

That must have been the motive.

I didn't know whether it had been planned murder or on impulse. Perhaps, I would have been able to find out if I dug a bit deeper, but I refrained from doing so.

The blurring of her vision that had occurred from time to time made me realize how sad she was.

She was the murderer. But she was also the one who mourned. Both facts were equally true.

I hadn't talked much with here. I couldn't let her get wind of the fact that I knew what she had done.

Because of that, I only pointed out that she had lost something important. Whether that was "he" or "the life from now" was up to her to decide.

As a pointer, I subtly suggested to turn herself in, saying, " what you are hiding will eventually come to light. Now is the time for action. You will find rescue if you take the right decision."

Again, it was up to her to decide. I wasn't going to notify the police. But seeing that she had gone to the police office the day before, chances were that she would do so in due time. I merely gave her a push.

The matter was closed. I was sure not to see her ever again.

"Excuse me!"

Suddenly, the door was yanked open and a high school-aged boy rushed in.

"What is it?"

He wasn't a customer, I figured. His blatant discomposure made it clear that something was wrong.

"Um, you were reading the crystal ball for a woman until just now, is that correct?"

"...Well, yes."

"You don't happen to know where she's gone?"

I began to wonder about the sudden visitor. What was he going to do with that info? Had he gotten wind of it, perhaps by witnessing the scene by chance? Indeed, that was possible seeing that he was here now.

He looked steadily at me, waiting for a response.

In that case...

I looked into his eyes as well and peeked further into them.

What will I see? That woman?

I was seized by the feeling of being sucked in. Connection established. Success...

"...Huh?"

The thing I saw took even me by surprise.

It was a corpse.

The neck was twisted in an abnormal manner, and the ground covered in blood streaming from the head. It evidently was a fatal injury. No, let's be clear: it was nothing else but a corpse.

It was then that—

"AAAH!"

A shrill scream resounded from the outside. Our connection came off. "Tch," he flicked his tongue and rushed outside.

Curious about what had happened, I followed after him. Outside the Mansion of Divination was a large crowd. I ran to them and pushed my way through the people toward the center.

"!"

What I found was a woman collapsed on the ground.

She was lying prone, but I recognized her by her clothes. It was the woman who had been at my place until a few moments ago.

To most people it must have looked like an accident. But to someone like me, who knew the circumstances, things looked a bit different. The *action* she had taken was not to turn herself in, but to commit suicide.

But that wasn't what bothered me.

Her neck was twisted in an abnormal manner, and blood streaming from her head was covering the ground.

It was the exact same scene I had seen in the boy's eyes.

I am able to catch a glimpse of what others have seen. Needless to say, that means that they must have seen it already, meaning it is the past.

Despite that, I had seen her corpse through his eyes before she even died.

What was going on...?

I didn't make it in time.

I hadn't expected to foresee the death of someone I'd only passed by, which is why I was confused at first about what I'd seen.

By the time I realized it was a Vision, the woman was already out of sight.

I entered the divination room she'd come from to ask about her whereabouts, but I was too late.

She had already jumped off.

A rescue party rushed to her, covered her in something similar to a vinyl sheet and carried her away on a stretcher. Some people amongst the crowding onlookers suspected she was already dead. I had to agree .

I slipped out of the commotion and headed back to the Mansion of Divination.

"Did something happen?"

Saki was waiting inside. She had apparently noticed the stir.

"...Someone plunged to her death."

"Really? You look terrible," she noted and felt my forehead. The touch of her small hand was comfortably

cool and slightly eased a kind of remorse that had seized me because I failed at saving the woman.

"Ah, the surprise, you know."

"...Take a rest in our room. I'll buy you something to drink."

Saki gave me a meaningful anxious look, but went outside without any questions.

The moment I stepped toward their room, the door to a different room opened. The fortune-teller I had talked came out through it. The signboard said "Mikagami Reika."

"Sorry about earlier," she said when she noticed me. On a second glance, she was prettier than I thought at first in her blue dress and with the accessory she was wearing. Intelligent eyes were looking at me from behind the lenses of her glasses, and she made a mature and neat impression on me, added to the mysteriousness that is particular to diviners. "What a horrible accident..."

Apparently, she had also noticed the commotion. I wondered what it felt like to see a customer commit suicide only moments after attending to her. *Wasn't she able to foresee her death?* I also thought ironically.

"I have no words. Even though I've scried for her, I didn't see this coming," she said with a bitter smile, but then added "can I have a minute?" while beckoning me in .

While a bit uncertain, I didn't turn her down and entered the room.

Inside, there was no illumination save for a few candles on chest-high candlestands, making it rather dim . On the table, I noticed a large crystal ball put on a pedestal.

"May I read your future?"

"Huh?"

"I couldn't foresee her death. Even though it was an imminent event."

Apparently, the woman's death had shocked Mikagami-san and left her with lost self-confidence.

Divination is a many-sided art. Some types employ tools like crystal balls and tarot cards to see something, while others aim to read someone's fate based on his birthday, sex, face or hands.

She employed a crystal ball, so she most likely used that to see something. Honestly speaking, I don't believe in this kind of divination that tries to appear magical. That said, I don't intend to deny them altogether. It's a fact that fortuneteller can help people to resolve their issues.

"I want to regain my confidence... so would you help me out?"

"But for free. Deal?"

She answered with a giggle, "Sure!"

She sat down on the other side of the table and switched into her divination mode, putting her hands on the crystal ball.

"May I ask your name?" she asked, her eyes behind glasses fixed on me and not the ball.

"Tokiya Kurusu."

"Kurusu... An interesting name. Do you go to high school?"

"Yes."

"Oh, your right eye is..."

"Ah, yes, it's artificial," I explained. It's unnoticable at a glance, but it becomes apparent when taking a closer look as it looked. That said, there was no need to hide it, and I had never had a complex about my eye. "I lost my right eye in an accident."

"I see. I'm sorry for you. By the way, what brings you here today?" She promptly changed the subject, probably because she had judged she would better not touch on my artificial eye.

"An acquaintance of mine asked me for a delivery."

"An acquaintance?"

"Err, she is helping out here. A part-time work of sorts."

I deliberately didn't mention that they were playing fortune-teller because I didn't want to risk offending a professional.

"I see. Quite kind of you to sacrifice your free day, isn't it?"

"She's my boss, you see."

"Yes. What kind of shop do you work at, if I may ask?"

"Umm..."

I considered giving her a reply among the lines of a *general store* or a *second-hand shop* because I couldn't just tell her everything about Relics.

However, I suddenly noticed something.

Why had she asked *what kind of shop* I worked at?

Not with a word had I mentioned that it was a shop.

But that question sorted itself out. The typical part-time jobs for high school students would be at fast-food chains or restaurants. Gas stations could be called shops as well. Saying things that are either natural

or very probable, or can be interpreted in two ways, is a speaking technique that aims to astound the other party. When constantly confronted with these tricks, credulous people will readily believe in some kind of supernatural power that the fortune-teller supposedly has.

But this crude observation of mine was easily smashed to smithers.

"You seem to be surrounded by a lot of things. Miscellaneous things. A super market, or a... no, it feels a bit more dated than that. A second-hand shop, perhaps? A general store?" she listed one fact after the other while holding her hands aloft the crystal ball and staring into my eyes. Those weren't things she could have possibly gathered from that chat with me. There was no speaking technique involved here. She was clearly seeing something.

I instinctively averted my eyes.

Her face relaxed visibly.

"I'm sorry. Have I scared you?"

"Ah, um... just a bit," I replied stagnantly as I wiped off the beads of sweat that had appeared on my forehead. " How did you know that?"

"I can see it. Not everything, of course, though." Mikagami-san grabbed my head with her hands and turned it toward her. "Look at me. Try to concentrate."

This time there was no conversation, and she just started looking deep into my eyes.

I was seized by a feeling of getting sucked into her eyes. I couldn't express it, but it was somehow as though she was not looking into my eyes, but into my very inside.

Perhaps, that feeling was not so far off. Maybe she read her clients' issues and troubles like this and helped them along.

From what I had heard, divination was not about supernatural powers, but acquirable teachings, and diviners were supposed to use that knowledge to solve others' problems and help them find the right direction for them, much like counseling.

However, this woman seemed to really have some sort of special ability. Or perhaps a special object? Maybe her crystal ball was a Relic? From my perspective, a Relic seemed much more believable than magic or superpowers.

"...As I thought," she suddenly muttered after some time during which I had completely been elsewhere in mind.

She averted her gaze from my eyes just to look at me once again.

"What is?"

"I'm talking about the woman who just died!"

"Yes?"

"Why have you been confronted with her death twice?"

"!"

I held my breath.

I didn't know how she had done it, but she had read that woman's death twice from my eyes.

In other words, when I foresaw her death and when I actually saw it.

"Your fate comes across her death twice. No, you have seen her dying twice, right? What does that mean?"

"That's... um... what do you mean?" I played dumb, unable however to hide my disturbance.

"You entered this room earlier because you were looking for her, right? Why did you search for her before she died?"

"No, I was looking for her because she dropped something, and..."

"Nonsense. I was able to read her death from you back then already, but I thought I was seeing things. But I've just confirmed it. You knew about her death."

As it looked, she had already read a few things from me when I'd first come to this room. *What was that with your self-confidence? You were after something entirely different from the start!*

"Care to explain?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about!"

I shammed anger, stood up and left the room straight away. So as to not let her notice my disturbance, I looked at the clock.

More time had passed than I'd imagined.

Oh, what have I done?

That was a blunder. I didn't mean to surprise or anger him.

At home again, I reflected bitterly on my actions.

Judging from his surprise, my guess was probably right.

I had looked into his eyes. Only superficially at first, while gaining his belief by talking about his employment. After that step, I looked much deeper into him and read information of all sorts off his eyes.

Until came across an astonishing find.

He had seen her death twice.

But I hadn't been able to get behind the reason for that.

I removed my glasses and gazed at them.

They had changed my life.

I had obtained them a few years ago. Because I had been drunk, I couldn't recall where or what that shop was, or who had worked there. But after buying these glasses, I became able catch a glimpse of the others' lives.

In the beginning, I just found it fun to sneak some peeks at their lives. I began with my friends and acquaintances and then went on with total strangers when there was nothing to look at anymore. But the only real occasions to look into the eyes of a stranger were on trains or a buses, or during the one-on-one conversations of the English course I visited. To make matters worse, I would only attract suspicion by staring for too long at someone and thus failed frequently.

And that's where I decided to become a fortuneteller. I was interested in divination anyhow, so that idea had occurred rather quickly to me.

I could sit myself down and look to my heart's content into someone's eyes, one-on-one, and by quoting the things I read off his eyes, he would even believe in my skills as a fortuneteller. I truly killed two birds with one stone.

A few years later, I had told the fortunes of countless people , and made a name for myself. I always had enough customers as well.

But amongst all the people I had seen during that time, there was not a single case that resembled his.

There was no one who had seen a non-recurring event like someone's death twice. Of course not.

That wasn't normal at all.

But since I wasn't normal, either, I was very well able to accept the abnormal.

Perhaps, he could see something special just like I could experience others' visual memories through my glasses.

Yes. In his case, he might be able to see the future through his artificial eye?

My gaze was drawn to my freezer on its own.

Now that I think about it, I haven't looked at it yet today.

Partly for a change of mood, I took the eyeball out of the freeze where I was carefully keeping it. The eyeball was as hard as that of a frozen tuna.

That peculiar texture had disappeared.

I picked my glasses up from the table and put them on. Holding the cold eyeball before me, I then looked into it.

"?"

This was strange.

I adjusted my glasses and looked at the eyeball again.

I was, however, not able to see anything.

Because it was frozen?

I went into the bathroom to fill a washbowl with warm water and returned to the living room. After inserting the frozen eyeball into the water, the frost melted away and it regained that peculiar consistence.

I took the eyeball out and looked into it again, but I could no longer see anything.

Gone dead, I thought right away.

Eyeballs can't be preserved for a long time after being separated from the body. I had been aware of that. But I'd been convinced that that was of no consequence to me because the eye's memories should remain whether it was dead or rotten.

But apparently, as soon as an eyeball itself dies, the memories die as well.

I didn't know that.

What a fool I was, everything aside!

My eyes were filled with tears.

Not once in my life had I felt such a strong feeling of loss.

That's how attached I'd become to that eyeball.

I should have forgotten about work and spent the day gazing at it! When would I get my hands on a human eyeball next? In my entire life, I had not come across such an opportunity save for this time.

Even worse, that accident had actually been the first time I was confronted with someone's death.

...Someone's death?

He crossed my mind once more.

His artificial eye might be able to foresee the future. If that was true, there was still a chance for me to obtain an eyeball.

I wanted his right eye.

And if that was too much to ask for, I at least wanted to look into an eye that had seen death once more.

"Hmnaa," I yawned out of utter boredom.

Even though it was Sunday afternoon, there was not a single customer. And even worse, there were no shop assistants, either, save for me. That said, that wasn't because Towako-san or Saki were working in their divination chamber, but because the police were interviewing the entire theme park staff about the suicide incident the day before. But besides the fact that they didn't have anything to do with that incident, the likelihood of suicide was so high that the whole fuss was apparently considered a mere formality.

The theme park in question also seemed to close for a while, bringing Towako-san's part-time job to a termination.

In the end, that job hardly yielded any profit.

Similarly, the Tsukumodo Antique Shop made almost no profit during that time, either.

Let's hope that they could at least do some successful advertisement over there.

Just when I was about to yawn again, the bell at the door rang.

I stifled my yawn and opened my mouth to welcome the customer, but no words came out.

The customer was fortuneteller Mikagami-san.

I gave her a wary look.

"What business do you have here?"

"Business with you, of course!" she replied frankly and approached me at the counter. "I have a request."

"What would that be?"

"May I have your artificial eye?"

She was so bold that it was clear that she knew that my artificial eye had special powers.

So does she have a Relic, too, after all? I quickly searched her with my eye, but she hadn't brought her crystal ball. I was relieved a bit that she wouldn't be able to get a glimpse of my secrets.

"I won't say for free, of course," she assured as she held out an envelope to me.

She urged me with her free hand to take a look, but just from its thickness I figured that it would amount to a six-digit number, provided that she had used 100,000 yen notes.

"What's so special about this eye?" I asked.

"Who knows?"

"It's just a common artificial eye!"

"In that case, there should be no problem with selling it to me, right?"

"......One way or another, it's not for sale."

I covered my right eye.

My right eye was the token of my debt to Towako-san. In addition, Towako-san was strictly against distributing Relics—she would never sell any of them no matter the price. Therefore, I couldn't possibly sell any, either.

The fortuneteller woman wrinkled her brow in blatant discontent at my response.

Why did she want my "Vision" so badly? To what conclusion on basis of what assumptions had she come after finding out that I'd seen the suicide incident twice?

"I have no idea how much you know, but let me assure you: it's not all that good."

"You think so?"

"What do you think it is?"

"It lets you see the future, doesn't it?"

Should I praise her for figuring out that much or should I feel relieved that she only figured out that much?

But as a fortuneteller, eyes with those abilities must make her mouth water.

"I'm afraid to say that it's really not that good. You can only see a limited range of uncertain future events. You can't use it to tip right in a lottery or a horse race. Nor can you forecast the weather. It wouldn't be of any help to your fortune-telling!"

"...What can you see then?"

"Only the imminent death of people who you have had to do with. But even that's just..."

...Huh?

A cold shiver ran down my spine. She looked still the exact same. There was nothing different about her. And yet I had a feeling that something had changed.

Have I just made a grave mistake? I thought.

Eager to find out what had happened, I stared at her—*this is bad* I thought the very moment our eyes met.

I instantaneously interrupted the eye contact by covering my right eye with my hand, when she leaned over the counter and grabbed my arm. With unfeminine strength she pressed both my arms down and drew near to my face.

She established eye contact with me whether I wanted or not. The instance that happened, I gulped down.

Since when did she have eyes like these?

She was eager to look into my eyes, with somewhat abnormal and sparkling eyes herself.

Even though she hadn't brought her crystal ball, she was clearly trying to look at me. To see my secrets.

Did the crystal ball have no deeper meaning? Did she not have a Relic at all? Did she actually have a real special power? If that was the case, I had no means of resistance.

"What the..." she muttered.

"Mm!"

I braced myself and shook her off, and retreated into the private area as I overturned my chair. I had no other choice.

"Wait! I want to see more! Deeper!" she yelled as she tried to climb over the counter, and fell over miserably. Not letting that stop her, she chased after me crawling.

Overcome by fear, I left the building through the back door.

I want those eyes. I want them.

I want to—I admit it—I want to see death.

I want to see death in all the forms it exists.

But neither do I want to see acted death as it's shown in movies and drama shows, nor am I interested in death that was manipulated by the producers of a documentary.

I only want to see raw death.

For that, I need them.

For that, I need those eyes.

I will get them no matter what I have to do.

I will get them whatever it takes.

I will get them even if I have to smirch my hands.

The girl I had discovered in the depths of his eyes crossed my mind.

After a while, I arrived at the conclusion that I could not leave the shop unattended and thus returned. From the looks of it, there was no one inside anymore.

Nevertheless, I erred on the side of caution and entered the building from behind.

I approached the shop area on tiptoe and sneaked a peek while hiding in the shadow. No one was there. Be it that she'd left chasing after me or that she'd gone home, I let out a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, a strong blow knocked me over.

Damn, did she go around me? I thought as I turned around, after which I was grabbed by the collar.

"Where did you go ditching your shift?"

"Towako-san... thank goodness..."

"Thank goodness my ass! Thank goodness that I wasn't a shoplifter?! Mm?! You didn't even lock the door for fuck's sake. I'll cut your wages if you go on like that, are we clear?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"You know, first I lose important time because the police insist on having useless interviews, then they want to harass me by dressing me up in my divination outfit, and to top things off, I get almost arrested for bodily harm when I smacked that officer when it got to my head ..."

Venting her frustration on me, Towako-san's grip tightened with each complaint she made.

Oh, dang. I can't breathe.

My head started to spin a moment after...

"I thought I was done for..."

As it seemed, that crazy-eyed woman who was after my artificial eye was no comparison to Towako-san. I found myself looking at that woman in a new light.

"That's what you get from goofing off."

She didn't show a sign of regret for almost choking me to death.

"Didn't I just explain it to you?"

I told Towako-san about the fortune-teller who wanted my eye. After telling her about that woman's special abilities, Towako-san suggested, "We may be dealing with a Relic here."

I had also thought of that, but...

"But she didn't have anything like that! She seems to be using a crystal ball at her chamber, but she didn't bring it when she came her..."

"No, it's not a ball. The Relic I'm thinking of looks like a pair of glasses, if I remember correctly."

"!"

"If you look into someone's eyes through the lenses, you can see what the target's eyes have come to see. You can learn almost everything about someone's life that way."

Indeed, she had worn glasses. Both back then and earlier. It wasn't the crystal ball—that was only for show. She had looked into me through her glasses.

Had I known about that before, I would have been able to take a countermeasure, but there's no use crying over spilt milk.

"I just hope she's given up..."

"You can't expect sanity and reason from a person under the spell of a Relic, though," Towako-san sighed with a bitterly contorted face.

"Mm?"

It had completely slipped my mind, but wasn't there someone missing? Wasn't she interviewed together with Towako-san?

"Where's Saki?"

"Ah, she wanted do some shopping before coming home. But she's quite late..."

I left the shop for a moment to look around, but there was no trace of Saki.

"Maybe she dropped by somewhere on the way?" Towako-san suggested.

"I don't think she would do that."

To be sure, I gave her a call on her cell phone, but I didn't get through to her because her mobile was switched off or out of range. There shouldn't be any

connection problems at the supermarket she always went to. Had she forgotten to switch it on after going to the police station?

Maybe I had gotten a bit too nervous.

"Well, I'm sure she'll be here soon," I said aloud, partly to assure myself.

However, as though that had pulled the trigger, my optimistic view was mockingly smashed into pieces.

A painful noise ran through my head—

A girl was leaning against a prop.

It was Saki.

Before her stood Reika Mikagami—the fortune-teller.

After stroking Saki's cheek once, she softly stroked Saki's eyelids with her thumb, and turned around.

She sneered.

Eerily. With unfocused, glittering eyes.

But that sneer disappeared at once.

The ceiling collapsed and buried them in stones.

"————!"

I clenched my teeth the moment I came to.

That woman had taken Saki hostage.

She must have gotten wind of Saki through my eyes, though I didn't know whether she had already known or only seen it earlier.

Either way, she had kidnapped Saki during her purchases.

I was careless. I hadn't expected that she would resort to such means.

It was as Towako-san had said.

Don't expect sanity and reason from a person who is under the spell of a Relic.

I knew where they were. I had already seen that place.

It was Reika Mikagami's chamber in the now-closed Mansion of Divination.

It was truly calm that day.

Usually packed with more than a thousand noisy visitors, the theme park had turned devoid of people because of a single casualty. Oh the comedy!

There were two theme park visitors that day—no, both were employees, so there were none.

"What's going on?" the girl before my eyes said, fixing her gaze silently on me. Her tone and expression seemed composed, but I was sure that at heart she was burning with anger at being deceived.

That said, she had naturally no means of escaping. She was chained to a fixed pipe by a handcuff on her right hand.

"Didn't you say Tokiya was here?"

I had told her that Kurusu-kun wanted her to come help carrying the luggage because the theme park had closed down.

As soon as she had heard his name, she followed me obediently. Probably, the fact that I was employed at the Mansion of Divination had helped weakening her guard.

I softly stroked her cheeks.

She accepted my strokes without showing any displeasure. No, while she did endured it silently, her eyes were distinctly refusing me.

I see. The eyes sure are eloquent as the tongue.

"May I take a look at your eyes?"

"My eyes?"

"Yes, your eyes."

I stopped stroking her cheeks and started stroking her eyelids instead.

She turned her face away, apparently appalled, but when she did so, something appeared from beneath her clothes. Due to the chain around her neck, the pendant didn't fall to the floor and swayed back and forth.

"Nice, this was a present from him? Oh, and you gave him a wallet?"

She looked up at me with faint but visible surprise. Her expressionless mask had finally broken off. It seemed like that pendant was very dear to her.

"How did you...?"

"I saw it in your eyes. But let me take a closer look... oh, I can't concentrate like this."

I raised my hand to remove the swaying pendant, when suddenly, she swept away my hand and put it back into her clothes.

"Don't touch it."

"I'm not interested in that pendant, I only want to look into your eyes."

Once I had said so, she showed clear denial of me.

She closed her eyes.

Wham!

A dull sound resounded through the room.

"Ah...," she uttered as her head fell down.

"I can't see your eyes if you close them, can I? And don't hang your head."

I pulled her head up by the hair. Her eyes had lost their focus because I had punched her head, but as long as they were open, I didn't mind either way.

"Come now, show me your eyes..."

That instant, I heard the door being kicked open as well as the shout of a boy. It was Kurusu-kun.

"Saki, are you okay?!"

"To...kiya..." she uttered in response to his voice and looked at him. He also looked at her and contorted his face in anger.

"You hit her...? How dare you take her hostage! She has nothing to do with it! Let her go!"

"Hostage...? Ah, I see now what you mean. Yes... yes, that's not bad either." I took out the knife I had prepared for cutting out the eye I wanted. "One step and I'll kill her."

As he suggested, I made her a hostage, but I couldn't suppress a laugh.

"No no, that would ruin the whole plan," I said as I put the knife back, and approached him.

"Huh?" he uttered in blank surprise at my behavior.

Still approaching him, I lifted up the my crystal ball—" You're in the way!"—and swung it down at his head. The vibration of the blow reached my hands together with a dull sound. My hands slipped off and the crystal ball fell down to the floor. I realized that spheres are no good for hitting someone. That said, his head started to bleed and he collapsed, so it was a success on the whole.

"Tokiya!"

I heard her cry and her handcuff rattle, but she was unable to move from where she was.

I walked back toward her, but I stopped after one step.

Kurusu-kun was grabbing my leg, even though he wasn't conscious anymore.

"I don't need you anymore!"

I kicked his hand away with my other leg and returned to her for good.

Much clearer anger than before was flaring in her eyes. I was very curious what kind of fierce emotions were hiding behind that deadpan face of hers, and what had made her like that.

Until a few days ago, I would have surely tried to find out.

But my interest in such trivial memories had completely gotten lost.

I wanted to see death. Only death.

"You've got something really nice here, haven't you?" I said. Her anger subsided, and her eyes sparkled with wit again.

"Why do you know..."

"I can see what others' have seen by looking into their eyes. At first, I wanted Kurusu-kun's eye. I wanted to obtain the

power to foresee death, and watch the deaths the eye had already seen. But you know, when I looked deep into his eyes, I found something much more splendid. Yes—your eyes."

"....."

Her face lost its expressionlessness entirely and distorted.

"I can't explain it myself! I've never felt like this before! But when I saw your eyes through his, I was drawn to them for some reason. More exactly, to the things you have seen."

I paused for moment.

"—Say honey, why do your eyes remember so many deaths?"

There were a lot of deaths inside Kurusu-kun's eyes.

There were also a lot of death inside her eyes.

The exact same deaths.

But for some reason, I was more interested in hers.

I was still unsure why, but I felt like I would find out if I looked deeper into her eyes, so I was anxious to take a look.

Don't worry, I'll cut them out once I'm done.

"But let me take a look first. To my heart's content."

I pressed her head back, holding her cheeks, and peeked into her eyes.

That moment, I received a blow on my back.

I thrust Mikagami away, banging into her at full tilt.

She knocked over the table as she fell to the floor, and apparently lost consciousness by hitting her head. I walked toward her and searched her pockets.

"...Found it," I murmured when I found the key to Saki's handcuff. "You okay?"

"Are *you* okay?"

"Yeah."

While wiping away the blood that dripped into my eyes, I searched for the keyhole to unlock her handcuffs.

My head was spinning, but now was not the time to whine about that.

Unfortunately, the handcuff around her wrist was facing downwards, so I couldn't make out where exactly the hole was. I turned to the pipe to unlock the handcuff there instead, but my hazy vision prevented me from properly inserting the key. After missing the hole several times, irritation made my hand even less steady.

"Hang on a sec, I'm opening it..."

"Tokiya!"

I raised my head, and saw Mikagami winding up a candle stand like a metal rod.

"Didn't I say you're in my way?!" she yelled as she thrust down the candle stand in a cold fury. I jumped aside at the last second, but my shoulder got hit, sending a cutting pain through my nervous system.

Is that woman crazy, charging at me with a candle stand after hitting me with a crystal ball? It was a long bar-shaped metal candle stand. I could have died in the worst case. *Wait, a candle stand...? Why is she holding a candle stand?*

I switched back to reality and looked around, but my nose validated my suspicions before my eyes could. A scorched smell had reached my nose. Next, I started to hear a crackle and see black smoke rising from the curtain. A candle had fallen from the stand and set the curtain on fire.

"Hey...!"

The moment I wanted to shout a warning, a new pain ran through my shoulder. Not until I was rolling on the floor did I notice that I had been hit again. Seizing the opportunity, Mikagami charged at my back.

"Wait... it's burning... we must escape!"

"I'll strike you to death first, and while I'm at it, I'll also take your eyes before I go!"

She wound up the candle stand.

It was then that a painful noise ran through my head—

Mikagami swung down the candle stand with full force.

I dodged her attack, rolling to the side, but she answered with a side swing.

I leaped back and evaded the tip of the stand by a hair's breadth.

However, I had jumped into a sea of flames.

But it was too late.

I went up in flames in a matter of seconds.

"_____!"

My brain was screaming alarm.

Unless I paid attention to where to I evaded her attacks, I was going to turn into ashes.

Mikagami swung down the candle stand with full force.

I dodged her attack, rolling to the opposite side than I had seen in my Vision—away from the flames—and immediately braced myself for her followup attack.

"?"

Mikagami had brought down the stand for some reason.

Had the future changed and she aborted her successive attack?

"Interesting. So that's how you use your eye?"

"Huh?"

"You were supposed to burn to death because of my charges. But you foresaw that, and took a different action ."

How does she know?! Ah, right... she can see through me by looking into my eyes.

Most likely, Mikagami had witnessed my death through my right eye. But I had changed my future by really reacting differently. She must have guessed my usage of Vision from that.

Quite calculating for a woman gone mad, aren't we?

"So how do I go about killing you?"

Mikagami wound up the candle stand again.

It was then that a painful noise ran through my head—

Mikagami swung down the candle stand.

I dodged her attack rolling to the side, but as though she had read my reaction, she changed direction midair and swung it sidewards.

Unable to evade, I was knocked away—into a sea of flames.

I went up in flames in a matter of seconds.

"————!"

The exact same future? Bullshit! As if I'd accept such a future!

Again, I tried to jump into the opposite direction than shown in my Vision, away from the flames; so far in fact that a next attack wouldn't reach me either.

However, Mikagami was already waiting for me there as though she had read my mind.

"Tch!"

My body reacted faster than my brain. I evaded her swing by stepping back diagonally. The wind pressure brushed the ends of my hair. One moment later and my head would have been crashed in halves.

"Close," she said while broadening her smile.

The current fight was completely different from the exchange of blows I had foreseen.

In all likelihood, she had guessed that I would evade in the opposite direction after reading my Vision, and thus gotten ahead of me.

Taking advantage of my attempts to change the future, she had also changed her behavior.

This is bad. She's one step ahead of me.

She had the weapon, so she also had the whip hand, whereas I had to wait for an opportunity to counter while avoiding my death. But if she was able to predict my dodges, I could no longer defend myself.

I had to behave contrary to her calculation while still avoiding my death, but there were not so many options. It's normal to go right if you know that you'll die if you go left. If anything, I could dodge forward and backward , but sooner or later she would guess right if she attacked me successively.

—In that case, there was only one right thing to do.

I assumed a stance against her.

"Looks like this place won't hold much longer. Let's put an end to this."

She wound up the candle stand and swung it down.

"Tokiya!"

I heard Saki's cry from somewhere.

It was then that a painful noise ran through my head—and I closed my eyes.

"!"

For a split second, I saw Mikagami's shocked face beyond my half-closed eyes.

The metal stand was flying toward me to kill me.

I instinctively tried to dodge it to the right, but I suddenly lost balance.

I had stumbled upon the crystal ball.

Having lost balance, I fell over in a miserable manner and...

My brains were smashed to pulp.

I opened my eyes.

Mikagami stared into my eyes trying to read my Vision.

But she didn't make it in time.

She simply swung it down as I had foreseen, but with its strength and speed largely reduced in fear that I would evade it.

I grabbed the candle stand with my left hand.

A dull pain ran through my hand, but I was firm not to let go of it.

If predict my reactions by seeing through me, I just had to prevent her from seeing through me. If she could guess right sooner or later, I just had to interrupt her successive attack.

It's my turn now! I thought as I stood up quickly. In order to evade my attack, she let go of the candle stand and backed off.

Heh. I didn't even need Vision to predict that.

I threw the crystal ball at her as hard as I could.

With a dull thump, the ball hit her head.

This was bound to have hurt. I speak from personal experience.

Mikagami fell down unconscious and stopped moving .

"Saki! Are you all right?!"

My relief didn't last long. The fire had spread out and the room was filled with smoke.

I rushed back to Saki to remove her handcuffs. With every breath she took, she breathed in smoke and coughed painfully, making me miss the keyhole. I couldn't get them off.

"Cough, cough.. Tokiya!"

"Did it!"

The handcuff around the pipe snapped open, but when I turned around to take Saki's hand, she ran past me.

Mikagami had wound up the candle stand yet again.

Saki had noticed her right away and hurled herself into Mikagami, taking her by surprise. They fell to the floor together.

"Saki! Quick!"

I tried to take her hand while running past them—but my hand only grabbed air.

"Huh?"

Before I could even turn around, my back was pushed strongly, and because of an unsteady head and legs, I stumbled forward a few steps and eventually tripped over.

"What are you..." I muttered as I stood up quickly. Several meters ahead of me, Saki and Mikagami were standing besides each other. "Saki! What are you doing?! We have to get out of..."

While trying to warn her, I noticed something.

Saki's handcuffs were connected to Mikagami's hand, as if to keep the fortuneteller on the spot.

Mikagami must have tried to attack me when I ran past them, but Saki thrust me out of range and prevented her from charging at me by handcuffing Mikagami to herself.

Why do you do that? What's the point if only I can escape?

A moment before I could step toward them, a piece of the ceiling broke off right before me. I quickly pulled in my leg and stepped back instead. Away from Saki.

"Ngh!" I groaned as I covered my face with my arm to protect it from the shower of sparks. Beyond my restrained field of vision, Saki moved her lips with a face as devoid of emotion as ever.

"Go."

I didn't hear her.

But I read it off her lips.

I wish I hadn't.

I would have been able to rush to her side without any hesitation and wavering.

But I did hesitate.

Without waiting for me to overcome my momentary hesitation, the ceiling of the room collapsed.

In order to prevent his escape, I tried to beat him with the candle stand, but I was pulled back as if chained to a rock.

The girl had taken advantage of the moment of distraction and had handcuffed my left hand to her right.

"Wha... What have you done...!"

I could never make it to the exit while carrying her.

I tried to get them off with my finger nails, but there's no way that was possible with bare hands. The key was in Kurusu-kun's possession.

"Stand up!" I yelled, but she stayed put as though she had no intention of escaping. "What are you doing?! Stand the fuck up !"

I tried making her listen to me by slapping her, but she just opened her mouth without even batting an eye:

"Didn't you say you want to see death?"

"Wha...?"

"You want to see death, right? Well, rejoice. You're going to see two of them in a moment. You and me. Burning to death."

"Don't screw with me, kid!"

"I'm not screwing with you. That's what it means to see death."

"There's no point if I die myself, is there?!"

"May I ask that *you* don't screw with *me*," she said in a calm but firm voice. "Who do you think you are? People do not die for your entertainment, nor do they die to satisfy your desires."

"Do you even realize what situation you're in?! You're going to die as well!"

"Yes."

"H-How can you be so calm? A-Aren't you frightened?"

"I don't get worked up about something like this anymore. Besides... maybe it's better this way."

I don't get it. I don't get her at all. What is she talking about ? Why is she so calm? This girl is a riddle to me!

"Eek!"

Because the ceiling suddenly collapsed, I ducked my head and lost balance. Since we were connected by handcuffs, I pulled her down with me, and we ended up lying on each other. She on her back, I on my stomach.

Our eyes met, and our gazes connected unintentionally.

Countless deaths came flowing from her eyes to mine.

I was buried under an avalanche of metal pipes falling from an overturning truck. An overwhelming death.

I looked down from a high place. Suddenly, I moved and approached the ground at unbelievable speed. Thump. A sudden death.

I gazed at the ceiling, but slowly my view became blurry and I closed my eyes. A silent death.

There were a lot more deaths.

Run over by a train. Stabbed by a phantom killer. Hung to death in suicide.

All kinds of deaths came flowing into me, heartlessly, mercilessly.

Why had her eyes seen so many deaths?

A girl so young.

A girl so normal.

She had some sort of secret.

...Interesting.

I had already forgotten this sentiment of being curious about someone else's life. Until I was fascinated by death, I had been genuinely curious about others. Which is why I enjoyed peeking.

But I got bored with others' lives and obsessed with death.

But she was different.

Surely, her life wasn't normal.

Surely, her life was something I had never seen before.

Surely, her life exceeded all my imaginations.

What kind of life had this girl spent?

What had she come to feel?

What had she come to see?

I wanted to see. I wanted to see more.

I wasn't interested in today, nor in yesterday, nor in her current life.

Farther into her past. I wanted to see the past that had shaped her.

I completely forgot about the situation and stared into her eyes. Deep into them. As deep as I could.

I ran into another death.

What I saw was—

A red curtain and black fog, and countless sparkling lights inside.

But neither was this sight beautiful, nor was it ethereal.

All of a sudden, a mysterious shadow erased the curtain, the fog and the lights.

Overwhelmed by that, I drew back, and lost the connection with her eyes. I was thrown back into reality, and her visual memories disappeared.

I didn't know why, but...

Even though I had just seen a death...

A death just as I had sought for...

I didn't feel the slightest pleasure and excitement.

I was drenched in sweat. Not because of the heat around me; it was cold sweat. Even though it was so unbearably hot, I was cold. I was trembling. My heart was in my boots.

I didn't know why, but I unconsciously refused to see that death.

What was the meaning of that?

Suddenly.

I heard something cracking above me.

I reflexively looked up.

What I saw was—

A red curtain and black fog, and countless sparkling lights inside.

But neither was this sight beautiful, nor was it ethereal.

The ceiling came down at me, slowly erasing the red fire, the black smoke and the sparks from my field of vision.

Huh? Why does this look so familiar to me...?

Before I could jump into the room that was now completely enveloped in flames, I was held back from behind.

I turned around and saw it was a guard.

I noticed that the fire alarm was ringing, which explained why he was here.

"Kid! Have you lost your senses?!"

"Saki's still in there!"

I tried to shake him off, but he was too well-trained.

"The fire department will be here in a moment! Wait for them!"

"They won't make it time! Don't talk shit!"

"No, you wait!"

"...Who do you think you are? A savior? My white knight? Just let the fuck go of me! There's someone dying right over there!"

Was I going to fail yet again?

Was I unable to save a single life despite my ability to foresee death?

On the back of my eyelids—

I saw a dead woman lying before a door with countless scratches.

I saw a woman lying in a lake of blood with her head twisted in an abnormal direction.

Beyond the flames—

I saw her, surrounded by fire and smoke.

"You'll lose everything if you die!"

"I'll lose everything if she dies as well!"

Struggling once more, I headbutted him, and apparently hit him straight into the nose. The pain caused him to let go of me. Seizing the opportunity, I plunged into the sea of flames.

I was assaulted by wave of heat and suffocating smoke , but I didn't flinch and went on in a lowered posture.

I could barely make out a collapsed person within the black smoke that was restraining my vision.

"Saki!"

I don't know if my shout was even audible, but I desperately called Saki's name in a hoarse voice.

There was no answer.

But that didn't change what I had to do

I jumped through the fire and finally reached Saki.

I had no idea if she was still breathing, nor did I know whether the heat I felt when touching her was due to her bodily heat or the surrounding flames.

"Saki! Saki!"

The fire was still spreading and the walls around and above us about to collapse. Certainly, I was supposed to escape as quickly as possible, but I could absolutely not endure one more second not knowing if she was all right.

I slapped her cheeks, I shook her shoulders, and I continued to call her name.

After a few moments that felt like an eternity,

"...Toki...ya?"

She faintly opened her eyes.

"Saki..."

"...I'm not dead...?" she muttered in dumb surprise upon seeing my face.

She was only half conscious and still unable to grasp the situation. Her voice was weak and her words not directed at me.

But she was still alive.

"As if I'd let you die."

"...I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"...I'm sorry."

She continued to apologize as though she was hallucinating. She was not fully conscious, either because of the heat or because she had breathed in too much smoke. While I had confirmed that she was alive, I still had to get us out of here alive.

I braced myself and took her up in my arms in order to carry her outside.

The handcuff around her right hand fell down, but it was not connected to anything. All there was was chunk of coal that was shaped like a hand in the distance.

The collapsed ceiling right beside that chunk suddenly caught my eye.

By a hair's breadth, Saki would have been buried there.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, the mountain of rubble moved and something appeared from beneath. It was a grimace that glared just as much as the fire enveloping us.

Our eyes mustn't meet...!

But those two eerie lights died out right away as if that had been their last glow.

As soon as my gaze came off, I turned away from Mikagami and somehow made it out of the room with Saki.

"We're save, Saki."

"...Are we...?"

"Yeah."

"...I'm sorry."

She apologized once more and passed out; but not without squeezing my sleeve.

Like a little child unwilling to leave.

I saw it.

Now I understand...

At the very last moment, I was able to look into both their eyes.

I had thought their eyes were the same, containing so many deaths.

But there was an essential difference that I had realized now.

No wonder I was drawn to her...

A week had passed since.

We were questioned by the police, but partly because someone's eyeball was found in her apartment, they believed us.

Mikagami got the abnormal label of a body parts collector. As someone who merely wanted to peek into others' lives, she would surely have been unhappy with that title, but she couldn't object any longer.

For a while, the press reported on the incident as the " diviner fury," claiming that she had been obsessed with black magic and stuff, but this story was already dying down.

"How long do you have to wear those bandages?" Towako-san asked while pointing at the bandages I was wearing all over my body.

The burns, the blows and the lacerations I had suffered were surprisingly minor, so I had been told that it would take two weeks until full recovery.

"I guess you can be glad that you got away with a black eye, eh?"

"I'm glad that I got away without losing one," I jested miserably, causing Towako-san to grimace.

"Did you turn into a clown when you hit your head or what?"

"Why, thank you," I said as I turned away.

Saki just came back from the living area carrying a tray with a tea. She had also suffered minor burns and a few scratches from the handcuffs, and had returned to her daily life at the shop. She behaved just like always.

However, something was still bothering me about that incident, but I couldn't bring myself to ask Saki about it.

When I rescued her from Mikagami's divination chamber, she repeatedly apologized for something.

But for what?

"What is it?" Saki asked when she noticed my gaze.

"Mm? Ah, um, do you remember what happened in that burning room?"

"Not clearly."

No wonder. She was quite absent in mind back then, so it didn't come as a surprise that she didn't remember.

"Is something bothering you?"

"Oh, I was just wondering why she was interested in your eyes when she was really after my Vision."

It made sense to me that she had taken Saki hostage in order to lure me out, but after beating me with the crystal ball, she didn't steal my eye and looked into Saki's instead. What had gotten her so interested in Saki's eyes?

"Probably..."

"Probably?" I asked, causing Saki's gaze to wander off for a moment.

"I just happened to catch her eye... if you know what I mean."

"......Huh?"

"N-Never mind..."

Saki quickly went back into the living room, completely forgetting to leave the tea here.

"Do Relics make people wanna say bad jokes or something?" Towako-san remarked flabbergastedly.

Before answering me, Saki had nervously averted her eyes from me.

I was sure that she... had no idea what Mikagami had wanted, and thus tried to cheer me up with a joke, but couldn't think of a good one.

The eyes are as eloquent as the tongue.

It seemed like I was slowly starting to get the knack of understanding her. Yeah.

1. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maneki-neko

Chapter 4 - Make-Up

When and how do girls learn to do make-up?

On TV, you can often see children literally turning themselves into monsters using make-up when mommy's not around, but I've never seen something like that in real life.

As for my own environment, I noticed that the girls in my class have started to do make-up about the time when we entered high school.

But not only at make-up are the girls ahead of us guys, but also when it comes to clothes and stylish haircuts. They must be more sensitive to fashion than us.

There *are* fashionable guys here and there as well, but that's the minority. It tends to be acceptable for men to be indifferent about this sort of thing. Not that I want to claim that I'm the standard, but it's a fact that I couldn't care less about fashion.

I suppose girls read magazines to get better in this field? But I don't believe that just doing that would do.

Which means that they must ask their friends or their mothers for advise on make-up and fashion.

But girls who do not have any friends and parents are at a disadvantage in that case.

Mm? Who I'm referring to, you ask?

Nah, I'm not thinking of someone in specific of course.

A wide range of bottles was placed on the desk.

Toner, milky and normal lotions, liquid foundation, cream... skin protection cream, hydrating cream, skin care cream... after-care articles to use after washing one's face or applying a face masque, or before putting on any make-up...

Since I hadn't had the slightest idea what to use when for what purpose, I'd just randomly bought a few things, but I was none wiser now that I had lined my purchases up.

In fact, this was only a small portion of the cosmetics available. All I could say at the moment was that face masques were still too high-level for me.

It was about ten in the evening, and I was holding my head in font of the mirror and a bunch of cosmetic products while still in a slip dress I had put on after taking a bath.

Supposedly, it is necessary do something about dry skin after bathing, but I didn't even know why my skin would be dry when I had just taken a bath. And supposedly, toner and such must not only be put on, but actually has to be massaged in.

Anyway, there's no use in sitting on my hands.

I decided to start while referring to my book.

I carefully poured some toner on my hands and moved them in circles over my face to massage it in. Following the instructions of the book, I also applied some to other places like my arms or the nape of my neck.

I was afraid that I would have to go through the same procedure again for the lotion and the foundation, but they were declared optional, so I omitted them altogether.

Thinking that the majority of all women were doing this every day, I felt deep respect for them.

I had just started doing cosmetics myself, too, but I didn't know how long my endurance would last.

No, this is the wrong mindset.

I must absolutely not give up.

Otherwise, I will end up like...

I looked at a certain crumpled picture on the table.

I tried to flatten it in my palm, but the picture remained crumpled, and the person in it remained as wrinkled as an old woman.

The incident occurred several hours ago.

Towako-san was away for her usual purchases, while the two of us were looking after the shop.

During my break, I went out to buy some things. When I came back, I put the groceries into the fridge, and was about to place a castella cake, which I had bought to go with tea, on the table in the living room when I suddenly noticed a camera there.

It was a rather old-looking analog camera, and so I was tempted to take it into my hands.

That's when it happened.

A loud shutter sound resounded.

I hadn't operated the camera, so either I had touched a wrong spot or it had activated on its own.

Discomposed I put the camera down.

...No one would have been able to tell, but I was indeed discomposed; because I feared that the camera might be a Relic.

Because of their special powers, it's impossible to predict what effect an unfamiliar Relict might have. Towako-san had the bad habit of just leaving Relics lying about from time to time.

How careless of me. I had been way too incautious.

I should have taken that possibility into consideration before touching it.

What if the camera had the power to suck up souls? In the past, we had come across a statue that would kill anyone who touches it, after all.

While I was mulling over these things, the camera produced a mechanical sound and printed out a photo. As it seemed, it was a Polaroid camera. But what was going to happen now?

I took the picture and took a look at it.

"Is this...?"

It was then that Tokiya peeked into the living room from the shop.

"Something wrong?"

"Ah, Tokiya. Look, this camera..."

"Mm? Ah, don't touch it, okay? It's a Relic Towako-san left there."

"So it really was a Relic."

"Hey, don't tell me you actually used it?"

I quickly shook my head, hiding the picture behind me.

"Yeah, you wouldn't," he said, "But seriously, be careful! It was a real mess when I touched that wallet Relic, you can take my word on that."

Of course, Tokiya had made just as many painful experiences with Relics as I. So if Tokiya was warning me about it, what kind of harm was hidden in this camera ?

"T-Tokiya... What power does this camera have?"

"To tell the truth, it's nothing sensational actually," Tokiya admitted as he entered the living room. After he had come over to the table, he picked up the camera, and rotated some kind of dial, and eventually took a photo of the castella cake I had put on the table. After a few moments, another picture was printed out with the same mechanical sound like before.

He took the photo and showed it to me.

Needles to say, a cake was in it. In that photo, however, it looked spoiled—almost rotten—and had a slightly different color.

"Why does it look different?"

"Well, you can take photos of the future."

"Of the future..."

"Aah, but there's a catch...," Tokiya said as he took a piece of the castella cake, and took a bite of it. "The picture only shows you how it *would* look after a certain period of time without taking into account that it might get eaten like now."

"How much time would that be?"

"In this case, maybe a year? Do you see this dial? You can set the number of years here, according to Towako-san."

"T-To how much was it set before?"

"Before?"

"I mean, w-was it also set to a year before you took this picture? It wasn't, right?"

"Err, how much was it again? I didn't really pay attention, but I think it was 16 years? Yeah, approximately. Only got a glimpse, though."

"16 years?"

"Yeah."

"Did you say sixteen years?"

"Yeah. Something wrong?"

"No."

He shrugged and went back to the shop as he shoved the rest of the piece into his mouth.

"I see, 16 years...."

I took a look at the picture, which I had accidentally crumpled up.

Deep wrinkles that weren't due to the picture being crumpled, snow-white hair, ragged clothes—

It was a picture of a girl called Saki Maino, 16 years from now.

...In other words, me.

That was outrageous.

Even when considering that I had never paid attention to my skin, that was just outrageous.

But when I took out an old magazine, I found out that even elementary schoolers were doing skin care nowadays.

According to that magazine, you couldn't start too early taking care of your skin because aging of our skin and body has become faster and faster in recent years for various reasons like an increased UV radiation or malnutrition.

Upon reading that article, I reflected on my indifference to this kind of thing.

As a matter of fact, there are all sorts of cosmetic products in the market nowadays, contrary to the past, which is frankly due to the fact that they're needed.

I then started to read up on the subject and not only touched on the basics like creams and lotions, but I also discovered that make-up also aims to protect the skin from UV radiation and the like.

So far I had come to think that make-up served the sole purpose of showing off, and thus had considered it negligible.

I didn't often spot Towako-san applying make-up, but she was indeed wearing thin make-up most of the time. And to be honest, she did look younger than her age. I

had always attributed it to her nature, but I had been mistaken. Towako-san had made an effort to stay young.

...Why hadn't she ever told me?

Having sensed a danger of sorts, I quickly went out and bought myself a range of cosmetic products, determined to start right away.

I could still make a change.

I looked again at the picture.

At my own crumpled appearance, sixteen years from now.

And then I vowed:

I'll get pretty in no time.

Even a girl like me is familiar with the desire that any girl conceives.

The desire to be pretty.

Three days had passed since I'd started doing make-up and skin care.

I unnoticedly went to the camera and picked it up.

Would there already be a noticeable improvement if I took a photo now?

No, don't rush things, girl.

Besides, I would instantly give up should there be none.

I put the camera down again.

One step at a time. No sweet without sweat. My effort is bound to yield fruit.

I'm not that much of a TV watcher, but I know how pretty stars are. They must be making an effort, too, behind the stage in order to shine on the stage.

To be honest, I'd rather do it in secret, too, but I won't get anywhere with such a lukewarm attitude.

After all, the fact that I'll be so horribly wrinkled in sixteen years also means that in the near future... maybe even in a month or so, I might start to age. No, the aging process might have already started and be progressing as we speak, just not visible to the eye.

There's no way around it.

That aside, Tokiya hasn't commented on my latest behavior.

Sure, I'm only slightly using make-up right now, but there's no way he wouldn't notice. He must be feigning ignorance. He's quite the gentleman for not touching on the effort I'm making.

Anyway, time to study while it's still my break!

It was then that I suddenly stopped flicking through the pages of the magazine.

I had found a special feature article.

"To all the girls who don't get any praise from their boyfriends despite all the effort they make."

...Let's take a look.

N-Not that it bothered me that Tokiya hasn't said anything about my looks. It's purely out of academic interest.

"Hey, Saki."

"W-Whawhahat?"

I had been so absorbed in the magazine that I failed miserably at closing it in a hurry. With even shakier hands, I quickly covered the magazine with my hands.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing. But what's your matter, anyway?"

"Toilet break. Can you look after the shop while I'm away? Not that I think that anyone would drop by," he said and headed to the bathroom.

I may have failed at closing the magazine, but I'd managed to change to a different page with a report, so he had probably not noticed anything. *That was close.* Had he seen me read such an article, he would have surely started to wonder about me.

After confirming that Tokiya was really gone, I opened the feature article again.

"Beware! Do not think that boys are dense just because they don't say anything about your effort to look pretty! Maybe your boyfriend deliberately keeps silent because he's starting to get bored of you!"

He doesn't say anything, indeed. Has he grown bored of me? No, we're not in a relationship, so he can't get

bored of me. Wait. Can he also get bored of me without being my boyfriend?

I took a closer look at the article.

Miss A's story. *My boyfriend didn't say a word when I changed my make-up. When I asked him about it, he just said, "So?" We split up a week after.*

Miss B's story. *There was that boy at work. We had the same shift and we mixed just great. But when I tried putting some extra effort into my make-up, he didn't even say anything. I asked him subtly about it. "Get back to work!" was his answer. Afterwards, I learned that he already had a girlfriend. I hadn't been a love interest from the start.*

"Wasn't there something in their stories that you can relate to yourself?"

There is. Right now. So does that mean that we have started to get bored of each other? That Tokiya doesn't have any interest in me?

"But fear not! Here's the deal!

Operation 'Amaze Your Boorish Sweetheart To the Bone! (Make-Up part)' "

The article contained an in-depth introduction to make-up as well as a number of handy tips, and came with a comic showing a man with heart-eyes praising a woman to the skies.

Inspired by that comic, I tried imagining Tokiya calling me pretty.

.....

.....

I think I like that.

I-I'm not talking about being praised of course, but the idea of having a concrete goal, since I've already started to get fed up with cosmetics. It's not like Tokiya were my boyfriend or that-certain-boy or anything, and I don't particularly want to be praised by him.

...But if I was honest, I was also a tiny little bit interested in praise.

Even a girl like me is familiar with the desire that any girl conceives.

The desire to be called pretty.

After finishing her break, Saki started sorting the shelves, bustling back and forth in front of me.

She took an item from a shelf, walked past me to put it elsewhere and then passed me by again, now carrying the item she had just replaced. But it didn't end there; apparently unsatisfied, she walked back with the item, crossing my field of vision again, and put it back to its original place, and then gazed at the shelf from afar to get an impression.

She was quite the opposite of me; I had made myself comfortable at the counter, waiting for our non-existent customers.

I followed her with my eyes just because, but Saki was apparently so engrossed in her work that she didn't notice me, not even looking in my direction.

"Saki."

"Yes?" Saki asked, stopping her busy hands.

"Looks good."

"Y-You think so?"

"Yeah, I definitely like what I'm seeing."

"D-Does it really make such a difference?"

"Yeah. I didn't expect such an effect just by rearranging the items in the shelves."

"Yes, yes. A light touch of make-u... eh? The shelves? Items?"

"Yeah. Have you started studying interior design this time around?"

"Y-Yes! I really think that the impression matters!"

"I see," I said.

"....."

"....."

"That's all?"

"Mm?"

"N-No, never mind."

While something still seemed to be on her tongue, Saki went back to rearranging the items without saying anything.

When Saki walked past me, I noticed a nice smell.

"Saki."

"Yes?" she asked as she stopped on her way to the shelf.

"Smells great."

"Y-You think so?"

"Yeah, it smells kinda stimulating."

"S-Stimulating? Wow... r-really? But I'm not trying to do anything suspicious!" Saki said, for once slightly widening her eyes in confusion.

"Yeah. I guess you're having stew for dinner? Sure is stimulating my appetite."

"Yes, yes. A light touch of perfum... eh? Stew? Appetite?"

"Yeah. You're already preparing the dinner, aren't you ? There's a nice smell coming from the kitchen. I think I'm hungry now."

"Y-Yes! We're having stew tonight!"

"I see... I wonder if should get myself some microwave stew, too."

"....."

"....."

"That's all?"

"Mm?"

"N-No, never mind."

While something still seemed to be on her tongue, Saki went to the kitchen to adjust the heat of the stove without saying anything.

"She sure is acting strange today."

She looked kinda disappointed even though I'd praised her. Or is that just me?

Speaking of strange things, I wonder what it is all about with that article. She may have covered it instantly, but I could catch a glimpse.

To be honest, I didn't think she would ever be interested in such stuff.

Well, she's still a girl. I guess that's perfectly normal.

But if that's the case, I'll get her something from the school library one of these days.

A few days later.

This is strange. Despite my efforts spent on make-up, Tokiya just wouldn't give me any feedback. I'd even ventured on perfume and lost to stew.

Not only did he not praise me, he didn't even touch on the subject.

Had he really not noticed anything? No, that couldn't be. He had noticed for sure. Had he really gotten bored of me then? But for that, he was associating with me too normally...

"Mm?" I muttered as I noticed a book on the table, one that I had not seen before. It wasn't mine. Had Tokiya forgotten to take it home?

I was somewhat interested in Tokiya's taste of books, so I picked it up and took a look.

From the hardcover binding, I had assumed it was a novel, but it turned out to be a theater script.

I'd had no idea that Tokiya was interested in theater.

The story was very much like a fairy tale.

Convinced to be the most beautiful woman under the sun, that woman would always try to become more beautiful every day. She received countless proposals, but she would turn every single one of them down because she thought that there was no man worthy of her beauty.

One day, she asked her magical mirror who was the fairest one of all, but the mirror replied with the name of someone else. Even though the woman increased her efforts to look more beautiful, the mirror never replied with her own name again.

The woman used her entire life solely for trying to look pretty with make-up and jewelry, and became old without gaining anything at all.

As time went by, the proposals subsided, and in the end, she died all alone.

"What's this..."

The message of this story was written in the postscript.

"You'd better refrain from futile efforts."

Something pierced through my heart.

What was the meaning of this? Of this strangely reverberating sentence?

Why had Tokiya left this book here today of all days?

"Ah! Perhaps... does he want to say that...?"

I hurried to my room and opened my dresser.

I was keeping *the photo* there so that nobody would find it. I really wanted to just throw it away, but I had deliberately kept it for the purpose of renewing my determination when I was about to give up.

The photo was there. However, I had no means of knowing that no one had seen it.

No, Tokiya had seen the photo for sure. Maybe he had known from the start. Maybe he had already seen the photo back when I took it.

He knew what I looked like in sixteen years from now.

And on top of that knowledge, he had left this script *purposefully* at a place where I would find it.

In order to say that my efforts were futile.

Before I knew it, I had thrown the script away.

I see. That's what you wanted to tell me.

Of course you would notice, right?

Of course you wouldn't get bored of me when you aren't interested in the first place, right?

Why, thanks for that eye-opener!

I took my cream and my lotion, and patted them onto my face, using twice the amount and time than usual.

But this wasn't enough by half, I was sure.

While applying make-up, I made up my mind.

It's time for my secret weapon! Even though I may have sealed it because of its difficulty level...

I put away the magazine I had been reading so far, and took a different book out of the depths of my book shelf.

Very well, Tokiya! I'll accept your challenge.

We'll see if I'm really making futile efforts here.

I'll make you lose your tongue.

Just you wait!

I'll become the most beautiful thing you've ever seen!

When headed to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop after school, I ran into someone who was leaving the shop with a contorted face. Figuring that Saki had done it again, I entered the shop with a sigh.

"Welcome, Tokiya."

"Hey, what have you done to that... WHOA!" I yelled out as I shrunk back.

"What's wrong?"

"Wrong...? That's my line... ah, no..."

To my surprise, Saki had put on make-up.

Needless to say, I wouldn't have been so surprised if it was just make-up.

No, she had put on some extremely heavy make-up, much like a member of a certain theatrical group that was popular among the girls at the moment. The group had become famous because of its members who wore

costumes that were as gaudy as it gets along with heavy make-up, and because of their scriptwriter who was an unparalleled master at reinterpreting existing tales.

Eye shadow glaringly purple, eyebrows like drawn with a marker, eyelashes lengthened to twice their original length, cheeks redder than in the coldest of countries, lipstick as red as blood, and fancy glitter all around her face.

As fancy as it might look on the stage from a ten or twenty meters' distance, it was just downright horrifying when seen from so near.

No wonder that customer went home with a grimace. We should be happy that he didn't scream his lungs out. I was curious what the customer thought our shop was after this incident.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Ah, no, nothing. Um, why don't you take a rest?"

"I don't need one."

"No, I'm sure you do. Aren't you a bit tired? Yeah, you should be."

"You think so? I'll take a short break then."

Losing to my persistence, Saki left the counter for the living room.

I changed my clothes, and sat down behind the counter, but I couldn't suppress the urge to sneak a peek at Saki.

What on Earth happened? No, more importantly, is it really okay to ask her about it? Or should I pretend like everything's fine and dandy? But she's making it way too blatant to feign ignorance.

Suddenly, the book she was reading caught my eye.

"Becoming An Actress Made Easy! (Make-Up for the Stage)"

That was the title.

"S-Saki?"

"What is it?"

"D-Does this book also help improving your customer service?" I asked.

With a deadpan look... no, that look was way too dreadful to be called deadpan, Saki replied, "What are you talking about? How would make-up and customer service be related?"

"Y-Yeah, you're right. Sorry for asking a strange question."

*Absolutely, absolutely. We're not a cosmetics store after all... Wait. It's like **I** said something strange now! I feel like our roles are reversed. Obviously, Saki's the strange of us.*

But that aside, how should I interpret her behavior?

O-Oh, it's a good thing to have a hobby.

While I'm against putting something like that on during work, regardless how interested she is, I guess I'll take a back seat and remain an observer.

Yeah, that's a good idea.

Towako-san, please come home soon.

"Tokiya."

I winced in surprise.

"W-What is it?"

Saki walked up straight to me and held out a book.

At that moment, it finally dawned on me as if hit by a thunder.

That peculiar make-up was that of the theatrical group Saki had been reading a report about in that magazine a few days ago. Sure, after realizing that she was interested in such stuff, I had brought her one of their scripts from the library and put it on the table in the living room, but I hadn't dreamed that she was fascinated by them so much as to imitate their actresses. No, maybe she was aiming to become an actual actress if her imitation was so close to perfection? *No, no, she wouldn't...*

"Thanks for that book."

"D-Did you like it?"

"Why, yes. I *loved* it."

It seemed like this wasn't about simple "interest"; her face was expressionless as always, but her eyes weren't.

I sensed fire in her eyes, almost as though she was glaring at me.

By the way, this book was a reinterpretation of a story whose moral was "Do not only polish your outside, but also your inside," and "Don't envy others for their looks; you are you, and they are they."

I hadn't read the book myself, but the student who helped out in the library had told me so. Apparently, the message the author had written in the postscript was just a little prank and shouldn't be taken seriously.

Actually, that library helper had given me another book which she obstinately recommended to me. I had originally planned to return it unread, but if Saki was so much into this sort of thing, I thought I might just as well lend it to her.

I'll leave that book on the table for her.

Mm, what should I get her tomorrow?

I found another book that day.

It was a script by the same group as the first time, and again it was a fairy tale-like story with a moral.

Once upon a time, there was a young woman living in a village. Her family was poor, her clothes ragged, and

her face and hands stained from the daily farm work. Because of her seedy appearance, she was always laughed at.

Despite all that, the girl tried to enjoy her life to the fullest, when one day, a man came to her place in order to thank her for saving him when he'd once slumped down on the road.

He was actually a nobleman and asked for her hand, presenting her with clothes and jewelry more beautiful and expensive than anything she knew.

After she had cleaned away the dirt and put on her new clothes, she turned into a most beautiful lady. She married the man and lived happily ever after.

The moral of this story was written in the postscript.

"No matter how pretty your face is, if you don't pay attention to your clothes and your hygiene, it's all for nothing."

Something pierced through my heart.

Tokiya was laughing at my desperate efforts in make-up, implying that even that wouldn't change my seedy appearance in sixteen years.

Before I knew it, I had thrown the script away.

Very well, Tokiya. I'll accept your challenge.

I'll show you the result of my "futile efforts," and make you lose your tongue.

Just you wait!

I'll become the most beautiful thing you've ever seen!

When I arrived at the shop he following day, Saki was wearing an extravagant black dress.

In her hands, she was holding a book titled "Becoming an Actress Made Easy! (Costumes for the Stage)." Indeed, the dress she was wearing was exactly that of a queen in the theater, and could probably only be found in a costume shop. I was surprised to see that she had even sought out such a special kind of shop.

Perhaps, she was seriously aiming to become an actress.

Her face was expressionless as always, but her eyes weren't.

I sensed the fiercest flames in them, as though she was about to pierce someone with her gaze alone.

"Oh, you're here?" she said.

"Yeah, I'm taking over here, so you can take a break."

"Thanks for the book."

"Did you like it?"

"Why, yes. I *loved* it."

It seemed like she had already finished the book I'd brought her. *Now that's what I call passion, reading through such a book in one day.*

By the way, the book was a reinterpretation of a story whose moral was "Don't judge over things by the first impression, maybe you'll find that they are really beautiful on a closer look."

I hadn't read the book myself, but the student who helped out in the library had told me so. The message the author had written in the postscript was again just a prank and shouldn't be taken seriously.

I'll leave the book I brought her today on the table.

Mm, what should I get her tomorrow?

I found yet another book that day.

It was a script by the same group as the first two times, and again it was a fairy tale-like story with a moral.

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom with a queen who wore a wig. One evening during supper, her wig was

askew, and everyone except for her had noticed. Because her wig really was a secret, however, nobody could point it out to her.

Everyone present started to pay attention that they did not look at her hair and that they did not use any words that would remind of head hair.

But then it happened: Her wig caught fire from a candle. But she still failed to notice. The other diners wanted to kill the fire by tapping or with water, but it would end in a disaster if the wig fell off by accident. If they did not hurry up, the queen would burn herself, but if the queen found out that they knew about her wig, they would be sentenced to death. The air was tense when the nobles started to shake a few bottles of weak liquor and popper their corks. The liquor poured over all of them , including the queen, and made the dripping wet, preventing the worst. Incidentally, this is the origin of what we now call "Champagne Fight."[1]

The message of that story was written in the postscript .

"Your hair is on fire, too. Better check your hair before it's gone. Furthermore, this story is incomplete. A continuation is in the works."

Something pierced through my heart.

Tokiya was laughing at my desperate efforts in make-up and fashion, implying that my untreated hair—the feature of beauty of every girl—will not only become disheveled but fall off entirely.

He even came up with an ironical implication that I hadn't lighted a fire under myself, but on my head, and by giving me a half-baked book, he implied that my efforts are just as half-baked.

Before I knew it, I had thrown away the script.

Very well, Tokiya. I'll accept that challenge.

We'll see if my efforts end up half-baked.

I'll make you lose your tongue.

Just you wait.

I'll become the most beautiful thing you've ever seen.

When I arrived at the shop the following day, Saki told me straight away, "I'm going to the barbershop today."

In her hand she was holding a book titled "Becoming an Actress Made Easy! (Wig for the Stage)." *She's come a long way*, I thought. Personally, I found her hair pretty as it was, but she seemed to differ.

Perhaps, she was aiming for the leading role and wanted to stand out most.

Her face was expressionless as always, but her eyes weren't.

I sensed fire in her eyes, almost as if she wanted to curse someone to death.

"Oh, you're here?"

"Yeah, I'm taking over here, so have a rest."

"Thanks for the book."

"Did you like it?"

"Why, yes. I *loved* it."

It seemed like she had already finished the book I'd brought her. Now that's what I call passion, reading through such a book in one day again.

By the way, the book was a reinterpretation of a story whose moral was "You look best when you're just yourself," and "Don't trouble the people around you with absurd lies."

Again, I hadn't read the book myself, but I was told so. The message the author had written in the postscript was yet another prank and shouldn't be taken seriously.

I'll leave the book I brought her today on the table.

Mm, what should I get her tomorrow?

That day I headed to the barbershop to get some hair treatment.

Not to the barbershop I usually went, but to a much fancier place: a shop that combined various areas of the

beauty business, from hair salons to make-up and nail salons.

Since that dress was sort of troublesome to walk in, I changed to my usual clothes, but I left my make-up as it was. The magazine said the UV radiation would hurt my skin otherwise.

"Welcome to...?"

Oh dear, where's the object in that sentence? I understand they don't know how to attend to customers here.

"I'm Saki Maino. I've made an appointment."

"Ah, yes. We've been awaiting you. Please, this way."

After I had been led to a seat, I was asked to sit down and was covered with a sheet. My body disappeared under the white sheet, with only my heavily made-up face poking out. It must have looked quite eerie, if I may say so myself. But it was all for the sake of getting a fine skin like an actress! I couldn't be picky now.

"My name is Koumoto and I will be your hairstylist today."

"Pleased to meet you."

Koumoto-san nodded and touched my hair.

"You have beautiful hair. Do you care for them a lot?"

"No. All I do is apply the most necessary when bathing."

I did use shampoo and hair oil, which I both borrowed from Towako-san, but nothing special.

But everything aside, having seen my looks in sixteen years, I couldn't care less about empty phrases.

"How would you like to have you hair done?"

"Like this. And I'd also like to ask for a treatment," I said as I gave him a cut-out from my book.

The haircut in the photo was coiled like a soft ice cream. While very offbeat, the cut was bound to be in vogue if an actress was wearing it.

Normal treatment was insufficient; in order to go one step further than challenged, I had decided to get myself a new haircut. There would be no room for any complaints after that.

"Err, this haircut?"

"Yes."

"Ummm, may I ask one thing?"

"Yes?"

"Is there a reason for that make-up and this haircut?"

The air tensed inside the salon, as though someone had dropped a brick.

"A... reason?"

Is he asking about the Relic that has shown my future appearance? No, he wouldn't know. But what is he referring to then?

"I mean, are you an actress and the play takes place tomorrow?"

"No, I'm not. I'm just a shop assistant."

"A shop... assistant..."

"Yes."

"Excuse my rudeness, but may I ask what book this photo is from?"

"Um, just from a normal book about haircuts really."

"Normal... Um, I really do not mean to be rude, but did you also refer to such a book for your make-up?"

"Y-Yes."

"A book on what?"

"It introduced various make-up techniques for actresses. I thought it was best to start by imitating an actress if I wanted to get good at make-up."

"Yes, of course... an actress."

Why is it that I feel like he is overly carefully trying to say something?

Looking at his face in the mirror, it's kind of contorted, and bitter.

N-No way...

I noticed a certain thing and reluctantly asked, "Do I look strange?"

While still trying to choose his words carefully, the hairstylist answered point-blank, "Very much so."

I gazed at my unmade-up face in the mirror.

I hadn't expected that the first thing I would do at the barbershop would be removing my make-up.

According to Koumoto-san, my make-up had indeed been that of an actress, but not what they would put on normally.

He also showed me a few magazines of make-ups, haircuts and fashion that was in vogue at the moment.

What I saw in those was not just far from what was in my books; it couldn't have been any more different.

O-Of course, I had also thought that the make-up was a bit heavy, the clothes a bit gaudy, and the haircut a bit extravagant, but it was a fact that there were people who actually used that outfit. Besides, I had been convinced that I couldn't get too aggressive after seeing myself in sixteen years and getting provoked by Tokiya. But as it seemed, my make-up had been too heavy, my clothes too gaudy and my haircut too extravagant. I was *really* grateful that I hadn't put on my dress when I'd come here.

"Mm, mm! Au naturel suits you way better!"

"T-Thank you."

I could see Koumoto's satisfied smile reflected in the mirror. Too embarrassed to hold his gaze, I turned my face down.

I was so close to my limits that I couldn't even be bothered that he had dropped his polite choice of words.

"Okay, can you look ahead for a sec?"

I had to turn my head upwards again. Right now, I was really grateful that my feelings didn't show much on my face.

Koumoto-san was holding a make-up tool.

"We're well-equipped because we also have a make-up and nail salon in the second floor here. Well, just look."

After he had applied a few basic cosmetic products, he lightly applied a foundation on my face and traced my lips with a weak lipstick.

"This should be more than enough in your case. After all, you have pretty eyes, well-defined eyebrows, and nice long eyelashes. In fact, you probably wouldn't need to do anything at all."

He's a pro, I thought when I saw how he managed to beautify my face while keeping it natural.

He also taught me a few tricks, and explained to me that there was no need for heavy make-up just to protect the skin from UV radiation.

I realized just how mistaken my shallow knowledge had been.

Now that I calmly looked back on it, I had to admit that my make-up had been gross. No one would walk around like that.

It seemed like I'd had, as was rare for me, lost my composure and become numb. How careless of me.

"Okay then, we'll just adjust your hair a bit today and then give it a treatment, is that fine?"

Needless to say, I had decided against that strange haircut and just asked him to adjust the length a bit, after which he applied a treatment. While I was waiting for the conditioner to have an effect, Koumoto-san talked with me.

"By the way, how come you started caring about make-up and hair care? Is there a cause?"

"Um, to tell the truth, I was shown how I might look in a couple of years." "Aah, one of those machines that can supposedly find out such things by analyzing the condition of your skin?"

I couldn't tell him about the Relics, but apparently, there was an actual machine that did something similar.

"It was a real shock to see so many wrinkles and slack skin..."

"Are you sure? I don't think so. You must have been fooled."

"B-But that's not all! When I started caring for my skin, a colleague at work indirectly told me that it's all futile effort and that my hair and clothes were awful as well, so I wanted to show him..."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

What? What is he talking about all of a sudden. Tokiya and I, we're not a couple or dating or anything.

But it's not the first time I was told so. No, maybe I'm being told so quite often. Does that mean that we look like that to others? But Koumoto-san hasn't seen us together... did he come to that conclusion from my way of talking about Tokiya?

Did I speak in a way that could be taken like that? Sure , we spend a lot of time together, and we're calling each other by the first name, and I've already visited his apartment, and we also go out together once in a while.

Is this what we normally call dating someone?

Mmm, no no. There never was a confession or anything, and I don't look at Tokiya in such a light. Ah, but I absolutely don't dislike him. More like, of all people around me, he's the closest to me... there's no one else my age, so he's the only one... Ah! With "the only one" I don't mean that I can't think of being together with someone else or anything, um, anyway, we're not seeing each other, and we aren't a couple, nothing of this kind.

Therefore, I bluntly said, "No. He's not."

"It took you quite a while to arrive at that conclusion, didn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"No need to affect indifference..."

"I'm not. I'm always like this."

"U-Uh-huh..." he muttered in reply as he smiled wryly for some reason. "Um, anyways, leaving aside what he

told you, it's important to care for your skin, but you shouldn't get over-eager. You have really pretty skin and hair!"

"Y-You think so? Thank you."

I'm relieved if a pro says so.

"I'll stop trying all kinds of things then," I said.

"Yes, that would be good. But you don't need to stop everything! Just the minimum. You're a girl; it's normal that you would want to look pretty for a certain person."

Apparently, Koumoto-san still had a wrong image of Tokiya and me.

Besides, this time it wasn't about being pretty for someone, but a personal matter of being pretty. I had to admit that I'd been fooled by that article and got a bit over-eager because of Tokiya's provocations, but he was really unrelated.

After that, we continued to chat a bit until the treatment finished, and in the end, I had him blow-dry my hair.

"Thank you for everything," I said, including my gratitude for clearing things up for me.

"No problem. Please visit us again if you like."

"Yes," I replied. But when I wanted to pay the bill, I realized:

"...I've left my wallet at home."

When she came back from the barbershop, Saki had removed that stage actor-like make-up.

The length of her hair hadn't changed too much, but it was a bit cut into shape. I had been afraid of what strange haircut she would get, but fortunately, my fears ended up being unfounded.

Since she didn't change into her actress dress, I assumed that she had finished the first phase of whatever she was trying to do.

I left out a sigh of relief internally.

I had decided to stop her if she were to do even stranger things.

"I think this make-up looks much better on you!"

"Huh? Eh? Ah, yes," Saki uttered with a few blinks, apparently a bit taken aback. "I-I have to go out again for a moment," Saki said shortly after arriving.

"Okay, but where are you going?"

"S-Shopping."

"Why didn't you do that when you came back?"

"I just recalled that I forgot to buy something! Anyway , take care of the shop while I'm away."

With these words, Saki left the shop again. Almost as if she didn't want me to inquire further.

This was bothering me. Something was weird. First that make-up, then those clothes, now this, I clearly smelled a rat.

"....."

After waiting that she had left, I followed her.

Without noticing me, Saki walked along the road.

Clearly, she wasn't shopping. The super market she usually went to wasn't this way.

After I had followed her carefully for a while, she stopped in front of a certain shop.

It was a beauty salon. With no hesitation, Saki entered the salon.

What's the meaning of this? Why would she go to a barbershop again when she just came back from one? Was her extravagant haircut just not done yet?

While hiding behind a telephone pole, I peeped into the shop. A young man who was approximately twenty years old approached Saki upon noticing her. He seemed to be one of those charismatic hairstylist and it looked like they knew each other already. Was he Saki's hairstylist of choice?

The two started to talk.

It was a normal conversation, but somehow they seemed to be rather familiar with each other. Even worse, I felt like I could recognize embarrassment in Saki's trademarked deadpan look.

Could it be that he's the reason why Saki started caring about cosmetics and fashion?

After they had exchanged a few words, the hairstylist tried to take her somewhere, pushing her a little.

Saki nodded once and followed along.

There was no way she would have to leave the department if she just wanted to get her hair done. No, coming twice alone was already strange enough.

Seriously, what's going on here?

Heavily confused by the turn of events, I just kept standing there thunderstruck.

I was so embarrassed about leaving my wallet at home that I couldn't tell Tokiya. Who knows how he would have made fun of me.

That aside...

I think this make-up looks much better on you!

Tokiya praised me.

That catchphrase in that magazine had been my goal, but I didn't *really* want to be praised; I hadn't started learning about make-up for that.

But I was happy... more than when I just imagined it.

Maybe, things like skin care, make-up and fashion, while bothersome, weren't so bad after all.

A-Also, looks like Tokiya didn't like that heavy make-up either. Why didn't he just tell me then!

I made a few complaints internally.

While mulling over such things, I arrived at the beauty salon and asked for Koumoto-san.

While I was waiting for him, the person at the reception praised me, commenting that this make-up looked better. Praise never feels bad of course, but because Tokiya had already praised me, I wasn't as happy.

I wonder why? Have I become used to praise just because Tokiya has done so once?

I was a bit ashamed of my conceit.

After a while, Koumoto-san approached me, and when I paid the bill while saying thanks again, he gently replied, "You didn't have to pay today."

The hairstylists around us who knew what had happened laughed.

First the make-up, then my wallet; it looked like I had become famous around here.

How embarrassing! I want to bury my head in the sand ! I don't look like that to anyone, though.

"Okay, payment received!"

"Yes, thank you for everything."

"Ah, wait a moment!" Koumoto stopped me when I was about to turn around.

"Yes?"

"Um, you know, we're holding a shooting here today for our new advertisement, but our model had to cancel last-minute. We do have a few shots from other candidates that could be used for the advertisement, but it would be a real shame if the clothes and the set we've prepared was all for naught."

"Uh-huh."

"Wouldn't you like to stand in?"

"Huh?"

I think that my surprise became quite visible even though it was me.

"You would fit the image perfectly! What do you think? Just think of it as doing us a little favor. Ah, of course you'll get a pay, and we'll try to accommodate you."

"Um, but I don't want to have my hair cut."

"Okay, no cut then."

"Um, but I don't have any experience in this sort of thing."

"Don't worry. We'll have pros take care of your make-up, your clothes and hair, you just have to sit there! "

"Um, but... but..."

I couldn't think of any other reason to turn him down.

"You're interested in make-up and fashion, aren't you? You don't get pros to do that for you everyday, and you can even get tips from the specialists. And considering how you looked earlier, this is a great opportunity if you ask me."

The *how you looked earlier* touched me in a sore point. I may not owe him a favor, but as a little token of gratitude...

"Besides, you can show that colleague of yours how pretty you are, and you may get some praise from him?"

"N-No need for that. But this might be a good opportunity to show him once for all."

Yes. I didn't want to be praised or anything, but I could show him.

As a matter of fact, I hadn't forgiven Tokiya for his provoking attitude yet. In fact, I was burning to show him

more than ever after I had learned a few tricks from Koumoto-san.

I had by no means taken a liking to being praised by Tokiya, and I did of course not want to get praised again.

"Please! Do us a favor!"

"Understood."

Contrary to my personality, I accepted being their model.

"Thank you, you're being a real help here! Do you have any wishes? Please tell me in advance what you don't want us to do."

"Um, there's one thing," I said and voiced one request I had.

Quite a while passed waiting for her.

She would still not come back. Just when I started to worry that she had been involved in a dangerous incident and planned to go to her rescue, the hairstylist in question appeared.

He went outside and started to have a puff. He looked like he had settled a job.

I accidentally stumbled out of the shadow, and our eyes met.

Thinking I was a customer, he gave me a nod.

If I were to leave now, I would make myself suspicious as hell.

"Ah, excuse me. I'm looking for a girl who's working at the same place like I am. Do you happen to have seen her ?"

I then told him Saki's name and her characteristics. I felt a bit stupid because I knew she was there.

The hairstylist pondered shortly, but then he nodded and told me that she was here.

"So you're her colleague?"

"Eh? Have you heard about me?"

"I was in charge of her today, you know. She told me a few things."

"I see. By the way, what has she come here for anyway ? Wasn't she already here earlier?"

"Aah, she has forgotten her... No, um, we have asked her to model for us."

It seemed like he was hiding something, but the latter part of his statement was more shocking anyway.

"Model for you?"

"Is there anything wrong?"

"No, I was just surprised."

I was indeed surprised.

She, a model? It was the surprise among surprises that she would accept such an offer. I thought that if asked, she would decline point-blank.

"Um, are you acquainted with her?" I asked the hairstylist.

"No, I only attended her today. You see, the model we had hired for our new advertisement couldn't come, so we asked your colleague to stand in."

Apparently, they weren't as familiar as I had thought.

I unconsciously let out a sigh of relief. Not that I really was relieved.

"Ah, you've come just right. Could you come along for a moment?"

"Yes?"

Without waiting for my approval, he dragged me into the salon.

While I do not know much about modeling, I was feeling like a doll.

One after the other, I was treated by professionals in hair style, make-up and attire, receiving praise and advise alike, and metamorphosed step by step.

I was told that I had nice skin. But that person, who incidentally was in her twenties, also warned me that I should be careful because it would get worse at once when I got older. Even though they were all so pretty, they all have worries respectively.

The person who was in charge of my attire had me take off my clothes and put on the new ones before I could even be embarrassed. I was told that my underwear was lacking sex appeal, but I didn't consider that necessary.

After this and that, a new Saki was looking at me in the mirror.

Because my hair was done up in a slightly loose and twisted fashion, my neck was exposed, making me feel a little uncomfortable. In addition, I was also wearing black ribbons that went well with my clothes. As for the color, it was left silver but they applied some sort of a temporary black mesh.

To my delight, my clothes were mostly black and gothic-style. Unfortunately, though, there were no sleeves and the skirt was above the knees, leaving me sort of embarrassed. I tried to pull up the elbow-long black gloves and the above-knee-high black fishnet tights as much as possible, but when I did so, I was strictly told not to.

In regards to make-up, they emphasized my eyes with mascara and added a weak red touch to my cheeks, and finally put on bright red lipstick, resulting in an overall mature and provocative appearance.

I had never been as dressed up as now in my life.

I may have been indifferent to make-up and skin care so far, but that was not because I had no interest in this sort of thing whatsoever. I did have my own views on what looked good, and I always tried to select products that suited me and that I personally liked.

That being said, I had never taken it this far.

Beauty sure needs courage.

While this style hadn't required that much courage because I had others do it for me, I shuddered at the thought of showing it to someone, especially Tokiya.

It was then that I heard Koumoto-san knock at the door and say, "Could you come, please?"

The shooting was over already, and he had been checking the photos, after which my job here was completed. Most likely, he had finished checking them and wanted to ask for my approval.

I opened the door.

"Huh?"

When I did so, Tokiya was there.

I lost my tongue in surprise.

Why is Tokiya here? Why isn't he doing his shift?

No, why is he staring so closely at me?

I somehow felt hot in the face.

Looking closely at me, Tokiya opened his mouth.

What is he trying to say, I wonder?

I'd had no intention of showing him, but since he had already seen it now, I couldn't help but wonder about his opinion.

I felt a mix of anxiety and expectation.

While holding Tokiya's gaze, I waited patiently for his words.

I think this make-up suits you much better!

His previous words crossed my mind.

Finally, he slowly opened his mouth again and said:

"Err, pleased to meet you."

T-This jerk...

I immediately shut the door.

Tokiya didn't recognize me just because of some make-up, some new clothes and a different haircut.

Koumoto-san had indeed said he would turn me into a different person, and I'd welcomed that because I didn't want anyone to recognize me in the advertisement.

But I hadn't thought that even Tokiya would fail to recognize me.

Is it really normal to mistake someone who you have spent so much time with?

I was somehow deeply disappointed.

"Hah," I sighed unintentionally.

What are you doing, girl?

Where had I started to go astray?

I originally only wanted to prevent the future by starting to care for my skin, after seeing how I would look in sixteen years. Despite that, I was fooled by that article, reacted over-sensitively to Tokiya's provocation and even

started to put effort into fashion and my hair style, just to end up as a model before I knew it.

I had learned something new, indeed, but I had also clearly made a mistake.

I felt like I had completely mistaken the means with the ends, gone through a pointless struggle.

I looked into the mirror.

An unfamiliar Saki was there.

And a Saki who hadn't been recognized by Tokiya was here.

Yes, I'll admit it. I was *in high spirits. I was in* somewhat *high spirits because of all the praise.*

But those feelings had gone away somewhere.

They had disappeared in an instant, although I didn't want to admit that it was Tokiya's words that caused it.

Really... what are you doing, girl?

I removed the ribbons that had held my hair up.

My hair fell down.

"Let's go home..."

In my disappointment, I noticed something.

Even a girl like me seemed to be familiar with the desire that any girl conceives.

The desire to look pretty...

...No... the desire to be praised by a certain boy.

"Err, pleased to meet you," I said, greeting a beautiful but unfamiliar girl, but she ignored me and shut the door .

My gaze wandered to Koumoto-san who was facepalming besides me.

"Huh? Don't tell me that this girl is..."

"Yes, it's her."

"Eeh?"

That was Saki? No way! But now that I think about it, I feel like it was her.

I wanted to see her again, but she had already closed the door.

"Look," he said, pointing at the photos on the table.

"!"

"Surprised?"

Saki was in them. Completely different from how she normally looked, but Saki was in them, more beautiful than I had ever seen her. It was the girl that had appeared behind the door just a moment before.

"I hadn't expected her to change that much, either! Incredible, isn't she?"

"Yeah, quite so..."

I could only give him a vague reply because I was having a shock.

Honestly speaking, those photos didn't look so much like Saki either. Unless told so, I may have not recognized her. In fact, I was still suspecting that he was fooling me.

However, once I had noticed a certain thing, I was dead-sure that it was Saki and nobody else.

I had found something proved it was her in the photos , although not noticeable to anyone else.

"What a pity. This was your chance," he said.

"My chance?"

"Well, you seemed to have a fight."

"Huh? I don't remember fighting with her."

What is he talking about? Did she talk badly about me when she had her hair done?

"But that aside," I said, "did you recommend becoming an actress to her?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Lately, she's been reading a series of self-improvement books titled 'Becoming an Actress Made Easy!' and imitating the make-up, clothes, and so forth of a certain theatrical group. Because I thought she was interested in this sort of thing, I brought her a few scripts of that group from the library, you see..."

"Your story is quite different from the one I've heard."

"The one you've heard?" I asked.

"Yes. She told me that her colleague at work implied that her efforts were futile when she started catching up on skin care."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I!"

I had completely become lost, including the fight Koumoto-san had mentioned. Well, I was used to her occasional strange behavior, so that in itself didn't come as such a surprise.

"So she doesn't want to become an actress, did I get that right?" I asked.

"At least from what I've heard, she only wanted to learn from their make-ups."

"But why did she suddenly start caring about make-up and whatnot?"

"Well? I don't know, but doesn't every girl have some interest in make-up and fashion?"

I couldn't believe that that was all in her case, but I couldn't think of a different reason. At the very least, there must have been something that sparked her interest .

"If there's a misunderstanding between the two of you, you should probably correct it as soon as possible," he suggested.

"Hah," I uttered vaguely. He was talking about correcting it, but I didn't even know what the problem was.

"Well, but whatever the problem is, you just made a blunder," Koumoto-san said as he patted my back, half out of bafflement, half out of encouragement. "There are two types of people. Those who dress themselves up for themselves, and those who do it for someone else. What

type do you think she is? If it's the latter, you should have praised her. Not recognizing her was a complete no-go, of course."

Tokiya and I returned to the shop without saying a word.

It seemed like he wanted to say something, unable to take heart, but I pretended like I didn't notice.

Once we had arrived at the shop, I went straight into the bathroom to wash my face. I'd had them remove the make-up and redo my haircut, and was wearing my usual clothes, but I just wanted to wash off that uncomfortable mood.

Only after doing so did I feel fresh again.

I looked into the mirror and found my usual face in there.

In the end, they accepted my request not to use the photos of my different self for their advertisement. Truth be told, I was relieved.

I searched my pocket. In it was a lipstick. Koumoto-san had given it to me as a token of gratitude, since there was no payment in the end. It wasn't a gaudy lipstick, but one with a pale color.

I tried putting it on.

Not to show Tokiya of course, but because I didn't want him to think that I gave up on make-up because of him.

I was quite sure that he was going to praise me.

He might be in the belief that I hadn't noticed because I'd closed the door, but I did know that Koumoto-san had given him some advise in front of the door.

I was sure that he would praise me like Koumoto-san had told him, and once he did so, I would reply like this:

"Oh, you do recognize it's me if I only put on this much ?"

With this sarcastic remark, I would conclude the matter .

I wasn't angry or anything.

Apparently, it was a misunderstanding on my part regarding the scripts he'd given me, and I didn't have the right to get angry at him just because he hadn't noticed my make-up.

I was just a little disappointed.

But I didn't want to stay like that forever.

This was a chance for Tokiya.

But if he didn't notice, it was over. I wouldn't care about him anymore.

That was my line of compromise.

I went into the shop.

Tokiya was sitting behind the counter and looked at me.

His gaze went to my eyes and then downward.

"Saki."

Here he goes.

My heart and my answer were ready to go. I only needed his words now.

"You put on the pendant, didn't you?" he smiled.

"!"

A surprise attack. He got me. As careless as I was, I hadn't expected that.

"Koumoto-san told me that you only accepted the job on condition that you may keep the pendant on."

I unconsciously grabbed the pendant under my clothes .

It was a pendant inspired by the moon.

It was a present I had received from Tokiya.

I had requested not to remove it in exchange to model for them.

Oh boy... you didn't have to tell him, Koumoto-san.

"Thanks, Saki!"

"I-I didn't do it for you. I just like this pendant."

"Your face looks kinda red."

"That's make-up!"

"Mm? Have you put on make-up again? I think you look best as you are!"

"O-Only lipstick!"

And here I am, giving it away myself.

...What a day.

While looking at Saki's photos, I noticed that she was wearing a shining pendant.

It was the very pendant I had once presented her with. That's why I became dead-sure that it was Saki...

although I do admit that it's pathetic to recognize her by a pendant.

A while after that incident, when it had settled down a bit, I asked her:

"By the way, why did you even start doing make-up?"

"I wasn't interested in make-up, but in skin care."

"Why?"

"....."

Saki mulled over something for a few seconds, but then she went into the private area of the shop and came back with a crumpled picture. Not only the picture itself was crumpled, but also the person in it.

"What's this?"

"A photo of me from that Relic camera."

"Of you?"

"You said the camera was set to sixteen, right? That means it's a photo of me in sixteen years. But I don't care.

I will care for my skin and make sure that it won't happen. Koumoto-san praised my skin, after all, and it looks like I've been successful so far."

Saki held out another picture.

"And what's this one?"

"A photo of myself in sixteen years I've taken just now."

In it was the grown-up Saki. While she still looked younger than thirty, the air about her was that of a mature woman, much like Towako-san.

Saki clearly was in a very good mood.

"Why don't you take a photo, too, Tokiya? Even if you're male, you may get the shock of your life if you don't care for your skin?"

"Aah, um, yeah, but that aside, isn't that change a bit huge?" I asked as I compared the photos she'd given me and picked up the camera. "Is this thing broken or something?"

"Hey, do you have a problem with my new photo?"

"No, not with the new, but with the old one. How would you become like this in sixteen... oh?" While tampering with the camera, I noticed something. "Is this camera set to sixteen years right now?"

"Don't you have eyes? Just look at the number down there."

"...Ah...I understand now."

"What do you understand?"

I patted her back and expressively asked her to listen to me composedly.

"The camera was not set to sixteen back then, but to ninety-one."

Apparently, I had looked at the dial the wrong way and mistook "91" for "16."

Now, isn't that a funny discovery?

"Hey, isn't that great? You're going to be a pretty woman in sixteen... Huh? Saki?"

I had no idea why, but I felt like I was hearing the rumbling of an earthquake or an erupting volcano.

Huh? Saki? Wasn't your deadpan look your trademark ?

Saki...!

1. ↑ It isn't.

Afterword

This was the second volume!

One more time: This was the second volume!

I didn't know whether I could release the continuation, but it all went nicely. This is also because of the support of my readers. Thank you.

Excuse the late introduction, I'm Akihiko Odou.

Did you like the second volume of Tsukumodo Antique Shop?

As the first book, it consists of four short stories that are all about the mysterious Relics. Needless to say, the Tsukumodo crew—Tokiya, Saki and Towako—are the protagonists again!

Well then, a few comments on the chapters like I did last time.

Silence

A mirror that produces absolute silence in the area reflected in it. A music composer who is fighting with noise learns about that mirror and asks to borrow it from Tokiya and the others. They agree because of a certain reason...

I can't concentrate when it's too noisy, but I feel uncomfortable when it's too silent. Seems like I have become pretty fussy. But back when I wrote the book that got me a price, I didn't really mind the noise and wrote a great deal in a restaurant...

Self

A mask that creates a perfect copy of the user in every respect when put on a puppet. Upon hearing from Towako that someone in his class has obtained this mask, he observes how a certain classmate of his changes bit by bit...

Have you ever thought about how it would be like if there was a second you? I sure have. Since when I was a child. Everything would be way easier that way, after all!

But considering that I'm using this idea in a story now, I haven't grown up inside, have I... ew...

Eyes of Death

A pair of glasses that let you peek into someone's eyes. A woman who takes to peeking into others' lives through their eyes looks into the eyes of an accident victim and finds out about an abnormal fetish she has. One day, she looks into Tokiya's "eye"...

The first thing I look at when seeing someone of the opposite sex are the eyes. No, that's a lie. I can't think of anything to write here.

Make-Up

A camera that makes photos of a certain point of time in the future. After accidentally using it, Saki discovers something horrifying... Please read the chapter if you're interested in how the make-up in the title and that camera play together. Well, I guess it kind of figures, doesn't it?

The first time I put on make-up was in middle-school. . ..Ah, but that was just a little joke by the campfire. I'm not into this sort of thing!

Okay, here comes the acknowledgment like always.

I would like to offer my thanks to Takabayashi-san, my great editor in charge, to Takeshima Satoshi, who has drawn those splendid illustration, to everyone who has helped making this book true, and last but not least, to my dear readers.

Thank you so much.

I hope to see you again.

Akihiko Odou